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Raoul presenting his pistol threw himself on the leader, commanding the coachman to stop

THE WORKS OF

ALEXANDRE DUMAS

IN THIRTY VOLUMES

LOUISE DE LA VALLIERE

ILLUSTRATED WITH A FRONTISPIECE
IN PHOTOGRAVURE

NEW YORK
P. F. COLLIER & SON

LOUISE DE LA VALLIERE.

CHAPTER I.

MALAGA.

During the continuance of the long and violent debates between the opposite ambitions of the court and those of the heart, one of our characters, the least deserving of neglect, perhaps, was, however, very much neglected, very much forgotten, and exceedingly unhappy. In fact, D'Artagnan—D'Artagnan, we say, for we must call him by his name, to remind our readers of his existence—D'Artagnan, we repeat, had absolutely nothing whatever to do amid this brilliant, light-hearted world of fashion. After having followed the king during two whole days at Fontainebleau, and having critically observed all the pastoral fancies and serio-comic transformations of his sovereign, the musketeer felt that he needed something more than this to satisfy the cravings of his existence. At every moment assailed by people asking him, "How do you think this costume suits me, Monsieur d'Artagnan?" he would reply to them, in quiet, sarcastic tones, "Why, I think you are quite as well dressed as the best-dressed monkey to be found in the fair at St. Laurent." It was just such a compliment as D'Artagnan would choose to pay where he did not feel disposed to pay any other; and, whether agreeable or not, the inquirer was obliged to be satisfied with it. Whenever any one asked him, "How do you intend to dress yourself this evening?" he replied, "I shall undress myself;" at which all the ladies laughed. But after a couple of days passed in this manner, the musketeer, preceiving that nothing serious was likely to arise which would concern him, and that the king had completely, or, at least, appeared to have completely, forgotten Paris, St. Mandé, and Belle-Isle—that M. Colbert's mind was occupied with illuminations and

fireworks—that for the next month, at least, the ladies had plenty of glances to bestow, and also to receive in exchange —D'Artagnan asked the king for leave of absence for a matter of private business. At the moment D'Artagnan made his request his majesty was on the point of going to bed, quite exhausted from dancing.

"You wish to leave me, Monsieur d'Artagnan?" inquired the king, with an air of astonishment; for Louis XIV. could never understand that any one who had the distinguished honor of being near him could wish to leave him.

"Sire," said D'Artagnan, "I leave you simply because I am not of the slightest service to you in anything. Ah! if I could only hold the balancing-pole while you were dancing, it would be a very different affair."

"But, my dear Monsieur d'Artagnan," said the king gravely, "people dance without a balancing-pole."

"Ah! indeed," said the musketeer, continuing his imperceptible tone of irony, "I had no idea at all of that."

"You have not seen me dance, then?" inquired the king.

"Yes; but I always thought it would make you firmer. I was mistaken; a greater reason, therefore, that I should leave for a time. Sire, I repeat, you have no present occasion for my services; besides, if your majesty should have any need of me, you would know where to find me."

"Very well," said the king; and he granted him his leave of absence.

We shall not look for D'Artagnan, therefore, at Fontainebleau, for this would be quite useless; but, with the permission of our readers, we shall follow him to the Rue des Lombards, where he was located at the sign of the Pilon d'Or, in the house of our old friend Planchet. It was about eight o'clock in the evening, and the weather was exceedingly warm; there was only one window open, and that one belonged to a room on the *entresol*. A perfume of spices, mingled with another perfume less exotic, but more penetrating, namely, that which arose from the street, ascended to salute the nostrils of the musketeer. D'Artagnan, reclining upon an immense straight-backed chair, with his legs not stretched out, but simply placed upon a stool, formed an angle of the most obtuse form that could possibly be seen. Both his arms were crossed over his head, his head reclining upon his left shoulder, like Alexander the Great. His eyes, usually so quick and intelligent in their expression, were now half-closed, and seemed fastened, as it were, upon a small corner of the blue sky, which was

visible behind the opening of the chimneys; there was just enough blue, and no more, to put a piece into one of the sacks of lentils, or haricots, which formed the principal furniture of the shop on the ground floor. Thus extended at his ease, and thus sheltered in his place of observation behind the window, D'Artagnan seemed as if he had ceased to be a soldier, as if he were no longer an officer belonging to the palace, but was, on the contrary, a quiet, easy-going citizen in a state of stagnation between his dinner and supper, or between his supper and his bed; one of those strong, ossified brains, which have no more room for a single idea, so fiercely does animal matter keep watch at the doors of intelligence, narrowly inspecting the contraband trade which might result from the introduction into the brain of a symptom of thought. We have already said night was closing in, the shops were being lighted while the windows of the upper apartments were being closed, and the irregular steps of a patrol of soldiers forming the night-watch could be heard in the distance. D'Artagnan continued, however, to think of nothing except the blue corner of the sky. A few paces from him, completely in the shade, lying on his stomach, upon a sack of Indian corn, was Planchet, with both his arms under his chin, and his eyes fixed on D'Artagnan, who was either thinking, dreaming, or sleeping, with his eyes open. Planchet had been watching him for a tolerably long time, and, by way of interruption, he began by exclaiming, "Hum! hum!" But D'Artagnan did not stir. Planchet then saw that it was necessary to have recourse to a more effectual means still; after a prolonged reflection on the subject, the most ingenious means which suggested itself to him, under present circumstances, was to let himself roll off the sack on to the floor, murmuring, at the same time, against himself, the word "stupid." But, notwithstanding the noise produced by Planchet's fall, D'Artagnan, who had, in the course of his existence, heard many other, and very different noises, did not appear to pay the least attention to the present one. Besides, an enormous cart, laden with stones, passing from La Rue St. Médérie, absorbed, in the noise of its wheels, the noise of Planchet's fall. And yet Planchet fancied that, in token of tacit approval, he saw him imperceptibly smile at the word "stupid." This emboldened him to say:

"Are you asleep, Monsieur d'Artagnan?"

"No, Planchet, I am not *even* asleep," replied the musketeer.

"I am in despair," said Planchet, "to hear such a word as *even*."

"Well, and why not? Is it not a good French word, Monsieur Planchet?"

"Of course, Monsieur d'Artagnan."

"Well?"

"Well, then, the word distresses me beyond measure."

"Tell me why you are distressed, Planchet," said D'Artagnan.

"If you say that you are not *even* asleep, it is as much as to say that you have not even the consolation of being able to sleep; or, better still, it is precisely the same as telling me that you are getting bored to death."

"Planchet, you know I am never bored."

"Except to-day, and the day before yesterday."

"Bah!"

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, it is a week since you returned here from Fontainebleau; in other words, you have no longer your orders to issue, or your men to review and maneuver. You need the sound of guns, drums, and all that din and confusion; I, who have myself carried a musket, can easily believe that."

"Planchet," replied D'Artagnan, "I assure you I am not bored the least in the world."

"In that case, what are you doing, lying there as if you were dead?"

"My dear Planchet, there was, once upon a time, at the siege of Rochelle, when I was there, when you were there, when we both were there, a certain Arab who was celebrated for the manner in which he adjusted culverins. He was a clever fellow, although very singular with regard to his complexion, which was the same color as your olives. Well, this Arab, whenever he had done eating or working, used to sit down to rest himself, as I am resting myself now, and smoked I cannot tell you what sort of magical leaves in a large amber-mouthed tube; and if any officer, happening to pass, reproached him for being always asleep, he used quietly to reply: 'Better to sit down than to stand up, to lie down than to sit down, to be dead than to lie down.' He was a very melancholy Arab, and I remember him perfectly well, from his color and style of conversation. He used to cut off the heads of the Protestants with extreme satisfaction."

"Precisely; and then used to embalm them, when they were worth the trouble."

"Yes; and when he was engaged in his embalming occupations, with his herbs and other plants about him, he looked like a basket-maker making baskets."

"You are quite right, Planchet, he did so."

"Oh! I can remember things very well, at times."

"I have no doubt of it; but what do you think of his mode of reasoning?"

"I think it very good in one sense, but very stupid in another."

"Propound your meaning, Monsieur Planchet."

"Well, monsieur, in point of fact, then, 'better to sit down than to stand up,' is plain enough, especially when one may be fatigued under certain circumstances;" and Planchet smiled in a roguish way. "As for 'better to be lying down than sitting down,' let that pass; but as for the last proposition, that it is 'better to be dead than alive,' it is, in my opinion, very absurd, my own undoubted preference being for my bed; and if you are not of my opinion, it is simply, as I have already had the honor of telling you, because you are boring yourself to death."

"Planchet, do you know Monsieur la Fontaine?"

"The chemist at the corner of the Rue St. Médérie?"

"No, the writer of fables?"

"Oh! Maître Corbeau?"

"Exactly so; well, then, I am like his hare."

"He has got a hare also, then?"

"He has all sorts of animals."

"Well, what does his hare do, then?"

"His hare thinks."

"Ah, ha!"

"Planchet, I am like Monsieur la Fontaine's hare—I am thinking."

"You're thinking, you say?" said Planchet uneasily.

"Yes; your house is dull enough to drive people to think; you will admit that, I hope?"

"And yet, monsieur, you have a look out upon the street."

"Yes; and wonderfully interesting that is, of course."

"But it is no less true, monsieur, that, if you were living at the back of the house, you would bore yourself—I mean, you would think—more than ever."

"Upon my word, Planchet, I hardly know that."

"Still," said the grocer, "if your reflections were at all like those which led you to restore King Charles II.—" and Planchet finished by a little laugh, which was not without its meaning.

"Ah! Planchet, my friend," returned D'Artagnan, "you are getting ambitious."

"Is there no other king to be restored, Monsieur d'Artagnan—no other monk to be put into a box?"

"No, my dear Planchet; all the kings are seated on their various thrones; less comfortably so, perhaps, than I am upon this chair; but, at all events, there they are." And D'Artagnan sighed very deeply.

"Monsieur d'Artagnan," said Planchet, "you are making me very uneasy."

"You're very good, Planchet."

"I begin to suspect something."

"What is it?"

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, you are getting thin."

"Oh!" said D'Artagnan, striking his chest, which sounded like an empty cuirass, "it is impossible, Planchet."

"Ah!" said Planchet, slightly overcome, "if you were to get thin in my house——"

"Well?"

"I should do something rash."

"What would you do? Tell me."

"I should look out for the man who was the cause of all your anxieties."

"Ah! according to your account, I am anxious now."

"Yes, you are anxious; and you are getting thin, visibly getting thin. *Malaga!* if you go on getting thin in this way I will take my sword in my hand, and go straight to Monsieur d'Herblay, and have it out with him."

"What!" said M. d'Artagnan, starting in his chair, "what's that you say? And what has Monsieur d'Herblay's name to do with your groceries?"

"Just as you please. Get angry if you like, or call me names, if you prefer it; but the deuce is in it; I know what I know."

D'Artagnan had, during this second outburst of Planchet, so placed himself as not to lose a single look of his face; that is, he sat with both his hands resting on both his knees, and his head stretched out toward the grocer.

"Come, explain yourself," he said, "and tell me how you could possibly utter such a blasphemy. Monsieur d'Herblay, your old master, my friend, an ecclesiastic, a musketeer turned bishop—do you mean to say you would raise your sword against him, Planchet?"

"I could raise my sword against my own father when I see you in such a state as you are now."

"Monsieur d'Herblay, a gentleman!"

"It's all the same to me whether he's a gentleman or not. He gives you the blue devils, that is all I know. And the blue devils make people get thin. *Malaga!* I have no notion of Monsieur d'Artagnan leaving my house thinner than he entered it."

"How does he give me the blue devils, as you call it? Come, explain, explain."

"You have had the nightmare during the last three nights."

"I?"

"Yes, you; and in your nightmare you called out several times, 'Aramis, sly Aramis!' "

"Ah! I said that, did I?" murmured D'Artagnan uneasily.

"Yes, those very words, upon my honor."

"Well, what else? You know the saying, Planchet, 'dreams go by contraries.' "

"Not so; for every time during the last three days, when you went out, you have not once failed to ask me, on your return, 'Have you seen Monsieur d'Herblay?' or else, 'Have you received any letters for me from Monsieur d'Herblay?' "

"Well, it is very natural I should take an interest in my old friend," said D'Artagnan.

"Of course; but not to such an extent as to get thin from it."

"Planchet, I'll get fatter; I'll give you my word of honor, I will."

"Very well, monsieur, I accept it; for I know that when you give your word of honor it is sacred."

"I will not dream of Aramis any longer, and I will never ask you again if there are any letters from Monsieur d'Herblay, but on condition that you explain one thing to me."

"Tell me what it is, monsieur."

"I am a great observer; and just now you made use of a very singular oath, which is unusual for you."

"You mean *Malaga!* I suppose?"

"Precisely."

"It is the oath I have used ever since I have been a grocer."

"Very proper, too; it is the name of a dried grape, or raisin, I believe?"

"It is my most ferocious oath; when I have once said *Malaga!* I am a man no longer."

"Still, I never knew you use that oath before."

"Very likely not, monsieur. I had a present made me of it," said Planchet; and as he pronounced these words he winked his eye with a cunning expression which thoroughly awakened D'Artagnan's attention.

"Come, come, Monsieur Planchet."

"Why, I am not like you, monsieur," said Planchet. "I don't pass my life in thinking."

"You are wrong, then."

"I mean in boring myself to death. We have but a very short time to live—why not make the best of it?"

"You are an Epicurean philosopher, I begin to think, Planchet."

"Why not? My hand is still as steady as ever; I can write, and can weigh out my sugar and spices; my foot is firm; I can dance and walk about; my stomach has its teeth still, for I eat and digest well; my heart is not quite hardened. Well, monsieur?"

"Well, what, Planchet?"

"Why, you see—" said the grocer, rubbing his hands together.

D'Artagnan crossed one leg over the other, and said:

"Planchet, my friend, I am astounded by surprise, for you are revealing yourself to me under a perfectly new light."

Planchet, flattered in the highest degree by this remark, continued to rub his hands very hard together.

"Ah, ah!" he said, "because I happen to be only stupid, you think me, perhaps, a positive fool."

"Very good, Planchet; very well reasoned."

"Follow my idea, monsieur, if you please. I said to myself," continued Planchet, "that, without enjoyment, there is no happiness on this earth."

"Quite true, what you say, Planchet," interrupted D'Artagnan.

"At all events, if we cannot obtain pleasure—for pleasure is not so common a thing, after all—let us, at least, get consolations of some kind or other."

"And so you console yourself?"

"Exactly so."

"Tell me how you console yourself."

"I put on a buckler for the purpose of confronting *ennui*. I place my time at the direction of patience; and on the very eve of feeling I am going to get bored, I amuse myself."

"And you don't find any difficulty in that?"

"None."

"And you found it out quite by yourself?"

"Quite so."

"It is miraculous."

"What do you say?"

"I say that your philosophy is not to be matched in the whole world."

"You think so? Follow my example, then."

"It is a very tempting one."

"Do as I do."

"I could not wish for anything better; but all minds are not of the same stamp; and it might possibly happen that if I were required to amuse myself in the manner you do, I should bore myself horribly."

"Bah! at least try it first."

"Well, tell me what you do."

"Have you observed that I leave home occasionally?"

"Yes."

"In any particular way?"

"Periodically."

"That's the very thing. You have noticed it, then?"

"My dear Planchet, you must understand that when people see each other every day, and one of the two absents himself, the other misses him. Do you feel the want of my society when I am in the country?"

"Prodigiously; that is to say, I feel like a body without a soul."

"That being understood, then, let us go on."

"What are the periods when I absent myself?"

"On the 15th and 30th of every month."

"And I remain away?"

"Sometimes two, sometimes three, and sometimes four days at a time."

"Have you ever given it a thought, what I have been absent for?"

"To look after your debts, I suppose."

"And when I returned, how did you think I looked, as far as my face was concerned?"

"Exceedingly satisfied."

"You admit, you say, that I always looked very satisfied. And what have you attributed my satisfaction to?"

"That your business was going on very well; that your purchases of rice, prunes, raw sugar, dried apples and pears, and treacle, were advantageous. You were always very picturesque in your notions and ideas, Planchet; and

I was not in the slightest degree surprised to find you had selected grocery as an occupation, which is, of all trades, the most varied, and the very pleasantest, as far as character is concerned; inasmuch as one handles so many natural and perfumed productions."

"Perfectly true, monsieur; but you are very greatly mistaken."

"In what way?"

"In thinking that I leave here every fortnight to collect my money or to make purchases. Oh, oh! how could you possibly have thought such a thing? Oh, oh, oh!"

And Planchet began to laugh in a manner that inspired D'Artagnan with very serious misgivings as to his sanity.

"I confess," said the musketeer, "that I do not precisely catch your meaning."

"Very true, monsieur."

"What do you mean by 'very true'?"

"It must be true, since you say it; but pray, be assured that it in no way lessens my opinion of you."

"Ah, that is very fortunate."

"No; you are a man of genius; and whenever the question happens to be of war, tactics, surprises, or good honest blows to be dealt, why, kings are all nonsense compared to you. But for the consolations of the mind, the proper care of the body, the agreeable things of life, if one may say so —ah! monsieur, don't talk to me about men of genius; they are nothing short of executioners."

"Good," said D'Artagnan, quite fidgety with curiosity, "upon my word, you interest me in the highest degree."

"You feel already less bored than you did just now, do you not?"

"I was not bored; yet, since you have been talking to me, I feel more amused."

"Very good, then; that is not a bad beginning. I will cure you, rely upon that."

"There is nothing I should like better."

"Will you let me try, then?"

"Immediately, if you like."

"Very well. Have you any horses here?"

"Yes; ten, twenty, thirty."

"Oh, there is no occasion for so many as that; two will be quite sufficient."

"They are quite at your disposal, Planchet."

"Very good; then I shall carry you off with me."

"When?"

"To-morrow."

"Where?"

"Ah, you are asking me too much."

"You will admit, however, that it is important I should know where I am going."

"Do you like the country?"

"Only moderately, Planchet."

"In that case, you like town better?"

"That is as it may be."

"Very well; I am going to take you to a place half-town and half-country."

"Good."

"To a place where I am sure you will amuse yourself."

"Is it possible?"

"Yes; and more wonderful still, to a place from which you have just returned, for the purpose only, it would seem, of getting bored here."

"It is to Fontainebleau you are going, then?"

"Exactly; to Fontainebleau."

"And, in Heaven's name, what are you going to do at Fontainebleau?"

Planchet answered D'Artagnan by a wink full of sly humor.

"You have some property there, you rascal."

"Oh, a very paltry affair; a little bit of a house—nothing more."

"I understand you."

"But it is tolerable enough, after all."

"I am going to Planchet's country-seat!" exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"Whenever you like."

"Did we not fix to-morrow?"

"Let us say to-morrow, if you like; and then, besides, to-morrow is the 14th, that is to say, the day before the one when I am afraid of getting bored; so we will look upon it as an understood thing."

"Agreed, by all means."

"You will lend me one of your horses?"

"The best I have."

"No; I prefer the gentlest of all; I never was a very good rider, as you know, and in my grocery business I have got more awkward than ever; besides——"

"Besides what?"

"Why," added Planchet, "I do not wish to fatigue myself."

"Why so?" D'Artagnan ventured to ask.

"Because I should lose half the pleasure I expect to enjoy," replied Planchet.

And thereupon he rose from his sack of Indian corn, stretching himself, and making all his bones crack, one after the other, with a sort of harmony.

"Planchet! Planchet!" exclaimed D'Artagnan, "I do declare that there is no sybarite upon the whole face of the globe who can for a moment be compared to you. Oh, Planchet, it is very clear that we have never yet eaten a ton of salt together."

"Why so, monsieur?"

"Because, even now I can scarcely say I know you," said D'Artagnan, "and because, in point of fact, I return to the opinion which, for a moment, I had formed of you that day at Boulogne, when you strangled, or did so as nearly as possible, Monsieur de Wardes' valet, Lubin; in plain language, Planchet, that you are a man of great resources."

Planchet began to laugh with a laugh full of self-conceit, bid the musketeer good-night, and went downstairs to his back shop, which he used as a bedroom. D'Artagnan resumed his original position upon his chair, and his brow, which had been unruffled for a moment, became more pensive than ever. He had already forgotten the whims and dreams of Planchet.

"Yes," said he, taking up again the thread of his thoughts, which had been broken by the agreeable conversation in which we have just permitted our readers to participate. "Yes, yes, those three points include everything: First, to ascertain what Baisemeaux wanted with Aramis; secondly, to learn why Aramis does not let me hear from him; and, thirdly, to ascertain where Porthos is. The whole mystery lies in these three points. Since, therefore," continued D'Artagnan, "our friends tell us nothing, we must have recourse to our own poor intelligence. I must do what I can, *mordioux*, or, rather, *Malaga*, as Planchet would say."

CHAPTER II.

A LETTER FROM M. BAISEMEAUX.

D'Artagnan, faithful to his plan, went the very next morning to pay a visit to M. de Baisemeaux. It was the

cleaning up or tidying day at the Bastile; the cannons were furbished up, the staircases scraped and cleaned; and the jailers seemed to be carefully engaged in polishing even the keys themselves. As for the soldiers belonging to the garrison, they were walking about in the different courtyards, under the pretense that they were clean enough. The governor, Baisemeaux, received D'Artagnan with more than ordinary politeness, but he behaved toward him with so marked a reserve of manner that all D'Artagnan's tact and cleverness could not get a syllable out of him. The more he kept himself within bounds, the more D'Artagnan's suspicion increased. The latter even fancied he remarked that the governor was acting under the influence of a recent recommendation. Baisemeaux had not been at the Palais Royal with D'Artagnan the same cold and impenetrable man which the latter now found in the Baisemeaux of the Bastile. When D'Artagnan wished to make him talk about the urgent money matters which had brought Baisemeaux in search of D'Artagnan, and had rendered him expansive, notwithstanding what had passed on that evening, Baisemeaux pretended that he had some orders to give in the prison, and left D'Artagnan so long alone, waiting for him, that our musketeer, feeling sure that he should not get another syllable out of him, left the Bastile without waiting until Baisemeaux returned from his inspection. But D'Artagnan's suspicions were aroused, and when once that was the case, D'Artagnan could not sleep or remain quiet for a moment. He was among men what the cat is among quadrupeds, the emblem of restlessness and impatience, at the same moment. A restless cat no more remains in the same place than a silk thread does which is wafted idly to and fro with every breath of air. A cat on the watch is as motionless as death stationed at its place of observation, and neither hunger nor thirst can possibly draw it away from its meditation. D'Artagnan, who was burning with impatience, suddenly threw aside the feeling, like a cloak which he felt too heavy on his shoulders, and said to himself that that which they were concealing from him was the very thing it was important he should know; and, consequently, he reasoned that Baisemeaux would not fail to put Aramis on his guard, if Aramis had given him any particular recommendation, and which was, in fact, the very thing that did happen.

Baisemeaux had hardly had time to return from the donjon than D'Artagnan placed himself in ambuscade close

to the Rue du Petit Muse, so as to see every one who might leave the gates of the Bastile. After he had spent an hour on the lookout from the "Golden Portcullis," under the penthouse of which he could keep himself a little in the shade, D'Artagnan observed a soldier leave the Bastile. This was, indeed, the surest indication he could possibly have wished for, as every jailer or warder has certain days, and even certain hours, for leaving the Bastile, since all are alike prohibited from having either wives or lodgings in the castle, and can accordingly leave without exciting any curiosity; but a soldier once in barracks is kept there for twenty-four hours when on duty—and no one knew this better than D'Artagnan. The soldier in question, therefore, was not likely to leave in his regimentals, except on an express and urgent order. The soldier, we were saying, left the Bastile at a slow and lounging pace, like a happy mortal, in fact, who, instead of keeping sentry before a wearisome guardhouse, or upon a bastion no less wearisome, has the good luck to get a little liberty in addition to a walk—the two pleasures being reckoned as part of his time on duty. He bent his steps toward the Faubourg St. Antoine, enjoying the fresh air and the warmth of the sun, and looking at all the pretty faces he passed. D'Artagnan followed him at a distance; he had not yet arranged his ideas as to what was to be done.

"I must, first of all," he thought, "see the fellow's face. A man seen is a man judged of."

D'Artagnan increased his pace, and, which was not very difficult, by the bye, soon got in advance of the soldier. Not only did he observe that his face showed a tolerable amount of intelligence and resolution, but he noticed also that his nose was a little red.

"He has a weakness for brandy, I see," said D'Artagnan to himself.

At the same moment that he remarked his red nose, he saw that the soldier had a white paper in his belt.

"Good! he has a letter," added D'Artagnan.

The only difficulty was to get hold of the letter. But a soldier would, of course, be too delighted at having been selected by M. de Baisemeaux for a special messenger, and would not be likely to sell his message. As D'Artagnan was biting his nails, the soldier continued to advance more and more into the Faubourg St. Antoine.

"He is certainly going to St. Mandé," he said to him-

self, "and I shall not be able to learn what the letter contains."

It was enough to drive him wild.

"If I were in uniform," said D'Artagnan to himself, "I would have this fellow seized, and his letter with him. I could easily get assistance at the very first guardhouse; but the devil take me if I mention my name in an affair of this kind. If I were to treat him to something to drink, his suspicions would be roused; and, besides, he would make me drunk. *Mordioux!* my wits seems to have left me," said D'Artagnan; "it is all over with me. Yet, supposing I were to attack this poor devil, make him draw his sword, and kill him for the sake of his letter? No harm in that, if it were a question of a letter from a queen to a nobleman, or a letter from a cardinal to a queen; but what miserable intrigues are those of Messieurs Aramis and Fouquet with Monsieur Colbert. A man's life for that! No, no, indeed; not even ten crowns."

As he philosophized in this manner, biting, first his nails, and then his mustache, he perceive a group of archers and a commissary of the police engaged in carrying away a man of very gentlemanly exterior, who was struggling with all his might against them. The archers had torn his clothes, and were dragging him roughly away. He begged they would lead him along more respectfully, asserting that he was a gentleman and a soldier. And observing our soldier walking in the street he called out:

"Help, comrade!"

The soldier walked on with the same step toward the man who had called out to him, followed by the crowd. An idea suddenly occurred to D'Artagnan; it was his first one, and we shall find it was not a bad one either. During the time the gentleman was relating to the soldier that he had just been seized in a house as a thief, when the truth was he was only there as a lover; and while the soldier was pitying him, and offering him consolation and advice with that gravity which a French soldier has always ready whenever his vanity or his *esprit de corps* is concerned, D'Artagnan glided behind the soldier, who was closely hemmed in by the crowd, and with a rapid gesture drew the paper out of his belt. As at this moment the gentleman with the torn clothes was pulling about the soldier, to show how the commissary of police had pulled him about, D'Artagnan effected his capture of the letter without the slightest inconvenience. He stationed himself about ten paces distant,

behind the pillar of an adjoining house, and read on the address, "To Monsieur du Vallon, at Monsieur Fouquet's, St. Mandé."

"Good!" he said; and then he unsealed, without tearing, the letter, drew out the paper, which was folded in four, from the inside, and which contained only these words:

"Dear Monsieur du Vallon: Will you be good enough to tell Monsieur d'Herblay that *he* has been to the Bastile, and has been making inquiries?

"Your devoted

"De Baisemeaux."

"Very good! all right!" exclaimed D'Artagnan; "it is clear enough now. Porthos is engaged in it."

Being now satisfied of what he wished to know:

"*Mordioux!*" thought the musketeer, "what is to be done with that poor devil of a soldier? That hot-headed, cunning fellow, De Baisemeaux, will make him pay dearly for my trick—if he returns without the letter, what will they do to him? Besides, I don't want the letter; when the egg has been sucked, what is the good of the shell?"

D'Artagnan perceived that the commissary and the archers had succeeded in convincing the soldier, and went on their way with the prisoner, the latter being still surrounded by the crowd, and continuing his complaints. D'Artagnan advanced into the very middle of the crowd, let the letter fall, without any one having observed him, and then retreated rapidly. The soldier resumed his route toward St. Mandé, his mind occupied with the gentleman who had implored his protection. Suddenly he thought of his letter, and, looking at his belt, saw that it was no longer there. D'Artagnan derived no little satisfaction from his sudden terrified cry. The poor soldier, in the greatest anguish of mind, looked round him on every side, and at last, about twenty paces behind him, he perceived the blessed envelope. He pounced on it like a falcon on its prey. The envelope was certainly a little dusty, and rather crumpled, but at all events the letter itself was found again. D'Artagnan observed that the broken seal attracted the soldier's attention a good deal, but he finished apparently by consoling himself, and returned the letter to his belt.

"Go on," said D'Artagnan, "I have plenty of time before me, so you may precede me. It appears that Aramis is not at Paris, since Baisemeaux writes to Porthos. Dear Por-

thos, how delighted I shall be to see him again, and to have some conversation with him!" said the Gascon.

And, regulating his pace according to that of the soldier, he promised himself to arrive a quarter of an hour after him at M. Fouquet's.

CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH THE READER WILL BE DELIGHTED TO FIND THAT PORTHOS HAS LOST NOTHING OF HIS STRENGTH.

D'Artagnan had, according to his usual style, calculated that every hour is worth sixty minutes, and every minute worth sixty seconds. Thanks to this perfectly exact calculation of minutes and seconds, he reached the surintendant's door at the very moment the soldier was leaving it with his belt empty. D'Artagnan presented himself at the door, which a porter, with a profusely embroidered livery, held half-open for him. D'Artagnan would very much have liked to enter without giving his name, but this was impossible, and so he gave it. Notwithstanding this concession, which ought to have removed every difficulty in the way, at least D'Artagnan thought so, the *concièrge* hesitated; however, at the second repetition of the title, captain of the king's guards, the *concièrge,* without quite leaving the passage clear for him, ceased to bar it completely. D'Artagnan understood that orders of the most positive character had been given. He decided, therefore, to tell a falsehood —a circumstance, moreover, which did not very seriously affect his peace of mind, when he saw that beyond the falsehood the safety of the state itself, or even purely and simply his own individual personal interest, might be at stake. He moreover added to the declarations which he had already made, that the soldier sent to M. du Vallon was his own messenger, and that the only object that letter had in view was to announce his intended arrival. From that moment, no one opposed D'Artagnan's entrance any further, and he entered accordingly. A valet wished to accompany him, but he answered that it was useless to take that trouble on his account, inasmuch as he knew perfectly well where M. du Vallon was. There was nothing, of course, to say to a man so thoroughly and completely informed on all points, and D'Artagnan was permitted, therefore, to do as he liked. The terraces, the magnificent apartments, the gardens, were

all reviewed and narrowly inspected by the musketeer. He walked for a quarter of an hour in this more than royal residence, which included as many wonders as articles of furniture, and as many servants as there were columns and doors.

"Decidedly," he said to himself, "this mansion has no other limits than the limits of the earth. Is it probable Porthos has taken it into his head to go back to Pierrefonds without even leaving Monsieur Fouquet's house?"

He finally reached a remote part of the château inclosed by a stone wall, which was covered with a profusion of thick plants luxuriant in blossoms as large and solid as fruit. At equal distances on the top of this wall were placed various statues, in timid or mysterious attitudes. These were vestals hidden beneath the long Greek peplum, with its thick, heavy folds, agile watchers, covered with their marble veils, and guarding the palace with their furtive glances. A statue of Hermes, with his finger on his lips; one of Iris, with extended wings; another of Night, sprinkled all over with poppies, dominated in the gardens and the outbuildings, which could be seen through the trees. All these statues threw in white relief their profiles upon the dark ground of the tall cypresses, which darted their black summits toward the sky. Around these cypresses were intwined climbing roses, whose flowering rings were fastened to every fork of every branch, and spread over the lower branches and upon the various statues showers of flowers of the richest fragrance. These enchantments seemed to the musketeer the result of the greatest efforts of the human mind. He felt in a dreamy, almost poetical frame of mind. The idea that Porthos was living in so perfect an Eden gave him a higher idea of Porthos, showing how true it is that even the very highest orders of minds are not quite exempt from the influence of surrounding circumstances. D'Artagnan found the door, and at the door a kind of spring which he detected; having touched it, the door flew open. D'Artagnan entered, closed the door behind him, and advanced into a pavilion built in a circular form, in which no other sound could be heard but cascades and the songs of birds. At the door of the pavilion he met a lackey.

"It is here, I believe," said D'Artagnan, without hesitation, "that Monsieur le Baron du Vallon is staying?"

"Yes, monsieur," answered the lackey.

"Have the goodness to tell him that Monsieur le Chevalier d'Artagnan, captain of the king's musketeers, is waiting to see him."

D'Artagnan was introduced into the salon, and had not long to remain in expectation; a well-remembered step shook the floor of the adjoining room, a door opened, or, rather flew open, and Porthos appeared and threw himself into his friend's arms with a sort of embarrassment which did not ill become him.

"You here?" he exclaimed.

"And you?" replied D'Artagnan. "Ah, you sly fellow!"

"Yes," said Porthos, with a somewhat embarrassed smile; "yes, you see I am staying in Monsieur Fouquet's house, at which you are not a little surprised, I suppose?"

"Not at all. Why should you not be one of Monsieur Fouquet's friends? Monsieur Fouquet has a very large number, particularly among clever men."

Porthos had the modesty not to take the compliment to himself.

"Besides," he added, "you saw me at Belle-Isle."

"A greater reason for my believing you to be one of Monsieur Fouquet's friends."

"The fact is, I am acquainted with him," said Porthos, with a certain embarrassment of manner.

"Ah, friend Porthos," said D'Artagnan, "how treacherously you have behaved toward me!"

"In what way?" exclaimed Porthos.

"What! you complete so admirable a work as the fortifications of Belle-Isle, and you do not tell me of it?"

Porthos colored.

"Nay, more than that," continued D'Artagnan; "you saw me out yonder; you know I am in the king's service, and yet you could not guess that the king, jealously desirous of learning the name of the man whose abilities have wrought a work of which he has heard the most wonderful accounts —you could not guess, I say, that the king sent me to learn who this man was?"

"What! the king sent you to learn——"

"Of course; but don't let us speak of that any more."

"Not speak of it!" said Porthos; "on the contrary, we will speak of it; and so the king knew that we were fortifying Belle-Isle?"

"Of course; does not the king know everything?"

"But he did not know who was fortifying it?"

"No; he only suspected, from what he had been told of the nature of the works, that it was some celebrated soldier or another."

"The devil!" said Porthos, "if I had only known that!"

"You would not have run away from Vannes as you did, perhaps?"

"No; what did you say when you couldn't find me?"

"My dear fellow, I reflected."

"Ah, indeed; you reflect, do you? Well, and what has that reflection led to?"

"It led me to guess the whole truth."

"Come, then, tell me, what did you guess, after all?" said Porthos, settling himself into an armchair, and assuming the airs of a sphinx.

"I guessed, in the first place, that you were fortifying Belle-Isle."

"There was no great difficulty in that, for you saw me at work."

"Wait a minute. I also guessed something else—that you were fortifying Belle-Isle by Monsieur Fouquet's orders."

"That's true."

"But not all. Whenever I feel myself in train for guessing, I do not stop on my road; and so I guessed that Monsieur Fouquet wished to preserve the most absolute secrecy respecting these fortifications."

"I believe that was his intention, in fact," said Porthos.

"Yes; but do you know why he wished to keep it secret?"

"Because it should not be known, perhaps," said Porthos.

"That was his principal reason. But his wish was subservient to an affair of generosity——"

"In fact," said Porthos, "I have heard it said that Monsieur Fouquet was a very generous man."

"To an affair of generosity which he wished to exhibit toward the king."

"Oh, oh!"

"You seem surprised at it?"

"Yes."

"And you did not know that?"

"No."

"Well, I know it, then."

"You're a wizard."

"Not in the slightest degree."

"How do you know it, then?"

"By a very simple means. I heard Monsieur Fouquet himself say so to the king."

"Say what to the king?"

"That he had fortified Belle-Isle on his majesty's account, and that he made him a present of Belle-Isle."

"And you heard Monsieur Fouquet say that to the king?"

"In those very words. He even added: 'Belle-Isle has been fortified by an engineer, one of my friends, a man of a great deal of merit, whom I shall ask your majesty's permission to present to you.'

" 'What is his name?' said the king.

" 'The Baron du Vallon,' Monsieur Fouquet replied.

" 'Very well,' returned his majesty; 'you will present him to me.' "

"The king said that?"

"Upon the word of a D'Artagnan!"

"Oh, oh!" said Porthos. "Why have I not been presented, then?"

"Have they not spoken to you about this presentation?"

"Yes, certainly; but I am always kept waiting for it."

"Be easy; it will be sure to come."

"Humph! humph!" grumbled Porthos, which D'Artagnan pretended not to hear; and, changing the conversation, he said:

"You seem to be living in a very solitary place here, my dear fellow?"

"I always preferred retirement. I am of a melancholy disposition," replied Porthos, with a sigh.

"Really, that is odd," said D'Artagnan; "I never remarked that before."

"It is only since I have taken to reading," said Porthos, with a thoughtful air.

"But the labors of the mind have not affected the health of the body, I trust?"

"Not in the slightest degree."

"Your strength is as great as ever?"

"Too great, my friend, too great."

"Ah! I heard that, for a short time after your arrival——"

"That I could hardly move a limb, I suppose?"

"How was it?" said D'Artagnan, smiling; "and why was it you could not move?"

Porthos, perceiving that he had made a mistake, wished to correct it. "Yes, I came from Belle-Isle here upon very hard horses," he said, "and that fatigued me."

"I am no longer astonished, then, since I, who followed you, found seven or eight lying dead on the road."

"I am very heavy, you know," said Porthos.

"So that you were bruised all over."

"My fat melted, and that made me very ill."

"Poor Porthos! But how did Aramis act toward you under those circumstances?"

"Very well, indeed. He had me attended to by Monsieur Fouquet's own doctor. But just imagine, at the end of a week I could not breathe any longer!"

"What do you mean?"

"The room was too small, I absorbed too much air."

"Indeed?"

"I was told so, at least; and so I was removed into another apartment."

"Where you were able to breathe that time, I hope."

"Yes, more freely; but no exercise—nothing to do. The doctor pretended that I was not to stir; I, on the contrary, felt that I was stronger than ever; that was the cause of a very serious accident."

"What accident?"

"Fancy, my dear fellow, that I revolted against the directions of that ass of a doctor, and I resolved to go out, whether it suited him or not; and, consequently, I told the valet who waited on me to bring me my clothes."

"You were quite naked, then?"

"Oh, no! on the contrary, I had a magnificent dressing-gown to wear. The lackey obeyed; I dressed myself in my own clothes, which had become too large for me; but a strange circumstance had happened—my feet had become too large."

"Yes, I quite understand."

"And my boots had become too small."

"You mean your feet were still swollen."

"Exactly; you have hit it."

"*Pardieu!* And is that the accident you were going to tell me about?"

"Oh, yes! I did not make the same reflection you have done. I said to myself: 'Since my feet have entered my boots ten times, there is no reason why they should not go in an eleventh."

"Allow me to tell you, my dear Porthos, that, on this occasion, you have failed in your logic."

"In short, then, they placed me opposite to a part of the room which was partitioned. I tried to get my boot on; I pulled it with my hands, I pushed with all the strength of the muscles of my leg, making the most unheard-of efforts, when suddenly the two tags of my boots remained in my hands, and my foot struck out like a catapult."

"Catapult! how learned you are in fortifications, dear Porthos."

"My foot darted out like a catapult, and came against

the partition, which it broke in. I really thought that, like Samson, I had demolished the temple. And the number of pictures, the quantity of china, vases of flowers, carpets, and window-panes which fell down was really wonderful."

"Indeed!"

"Without reckoning that on the other side of the partition was a small table laden with porcelain——"

"Which you knocked over?"

"Which I dashed to the other side of the room," said Porthos, laughing.

"Upon my word, it is, as you say, astonishing," replied D'Artagnan, beginning to laugh also; whereupon Porthos laughed louder than ever.

"I broke," said Porthos, in a voice half-choked from his increasing mirth, "more than three thousand francs' worth of china—oh! oh! oh!"

"Good!" said D'Artagnan.

"I smashed more than four thousand francs' worth of glass—oh! oh! oh!"

"Excellent."

"Without counting a luster, which fell on my head and was broken into a thousand pieces—oh! oh! oh!"

"Upon your head?" said D'Artagnan, holding his sides.

"On the top."

"But your head was broken, I suppose?"

"No; since I tell you, on the contrary, my dear fellow, that it was the luster which was broken like glass, as it was, indeed."

"Ah! the luster was glass, you say."

"Venetian glass; a perfect curiosity, quite matchless, indeed, and weighed two hundred pounds."

"And which fell upon your head?"

"Upon my head. Just imagine, a globe of crystal, gilded all over, the lower part beautifully incrusted, perfumes burning at the top, the jets from which flame issued when they were lighted."

"I quite understand; but they were not lighted at the time, I suppose?"

"Happily not, or I should have been set on fire."

"And you were only knocked down flat, instead?"

"Not at all."

"How, not at all?"

"Why, the luster fell on my skull. It appears that we have upon the top of our heads an exceedingly thick crust."

"Who told you that, Porthos?"

"The doctor. A sort of dome which would bear Notre Dame, at Paris."

"Bah!"

"Yes, it seems that our skulls are made in that manner."

"Speak for yourself, my dear fellow, it is your own skull that is made in that manner, and not the skulls of other people."

"Well, that may be so," said Porthos conceitedly, "so much, however, was that the case, in my instance, that no sooner did the luster fall upon the dome which we have at the top of our head than there was a report like a cannon, the crystal was broken to pieces, and I fell, covered from head to foot."

"With blood, poor Porthos!"

"Not at all; with perfumes, which smelled like rich creams; it was delicious, but the odor was too strong, and I felt quite giddy from it; perhaps you have experienced it sometimes yourself, D'Artagnan?"

"Yes, in inhaling the scent of the lily of the valley; so that, my poor friend, you were knocked over by the shock and overpowered by the odor?"

"Yes; but what is very remarkable, for the doctor told me he had never seen anything like it——"

"You had a bump on your head, I suppose?" interrupted D'Artagnan.

"I had five."

"Why five?"

"I will tell you; the luster had, at its lower extremity, five gilt ornaments excessively sharp."

"Oh!"

"Well, these five ornaments penetrated my hair, which, as you see, I wear very thick."

"Fortunately so."

"And they made a mark on my skin. But just notice the singularity of it, these things seem really only to happen me. Instead of making indentations, they made bumps. The doctor could never succeed in explaining that to me satisfactorily."

"Well, then, I will explain it to you."

"You will do me a great service if you will," said Porthos, winking his eyes, which, with him, was a sign of the profoundest attention.

"Since you have been employing your brain in studies of an exalted character, in important calculations, and so on,

the head has gained a certain advantage, so that your head is now too full of science."

"Do you think so?"

"I am sure of it. The result is, that, instead of allowing any foreign matter to penetrate the interior of the head, your bony box or skull, which is already too full, avails itself of the openings which are made in it allowing this excess to escape."

"Ah!" said Porthos, to whom this explanation appeared clearer than that of the doctor.

"The five protuberances, caused by the five ornaments of the luster, must certainly have been scientific masses brought to the surface by the force of circumstances."

"In fact," said Porthos, "the real truth is, that I felt far worse outside my head than inside. I will even confess that when I put my hat upon my head, clapping it on my head with that graceful energy which we gentlemen of the sword possess, if my fist was not very gently applied, I experienced the most painful sensations."

"I quite believe you, Porthos."

"Therefore, my friend," said the giant, "Monsieur Fouquet decided, seeing how slightly built the house was, to give me another lodging, and so they brought me here."

"It is the private park, I think, is it not?"

"Yes."

"Where the rendezvous are made; that park, indeed, which is so celebrated in some of those mysterious stories about the surintendant."

"I don't know; I have had no rendezvous or heard mysterious stories myself, but they have authorized me to exercise my muscles, and I take advantage of the permission by rooting up some of the trees."

"What for?"

"To keep my hand in, and also to take some birds' nests; I find that more convenient than climbing up the trees."

"You are as pastoral as Tyrcis, my dear Porthos."

"Yes, I like the small eggs; I like them very much better than larger ones. You have no idea how delicate an omelet is if made of four or five hundred eggs of linnets, chaffinches, starlings, blackbirds, and thrushes."

"But five hundred eggs is perfectly monstrous!"

"A salad-bowl will hold them easily enough," said Porthos.

D'Artagnan looked at Porthos admiringly for full five minutes, as if he had seen him for the first time, while

Porthos spread himself out joyously and proudly. They remained in this state several minutes, Porthos smiling, and D'Artagnan looking at him. D'Artagnan was evidently trying to give the conversation a new turn. "Do you amuse yourself much here, Porthos?" he asked at last, very likely after he had found out what he was searching for.

"Not always."

"I can imagine that; but when you get thoroughly bored, by and by, what do you intend to do?"

"Oh! I shall not be here for any length of time. Aramis is waiting until the last bump on my head disappears, in order to present me to the king, who I am told cannot endure the sight of a bump."

"Aramis is still in Paris, then?"

"No."

"Whereabouts is he, then?"

"At Fontainebleau."

"Alone?"

"With Monsieur Fouquet."

"Very good. But do you happen to know one thing?"

"No, tell it me, and then I shall know."

"Well, then, I think that Aramis is forgetting you."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes; for at Fontainebleau yonder, you must know, they are laughing, dancing, banqueting, and drawing the corks of Monsieur de Mazarin's wine in fine style. Are you aware that they have a ballet every evening?"

"The deuce they have."

"I assure you that dear Aramis is forgetting you."

"Well, that is not at all unlikely, and I have myself thought so sometimes."

"Unless he is playing you a trick, the sly fellow!"

"Oh!"

"You know that Aramis is as sly as a fox."

"Yes; but to play me a trick——"

"Listen: in the first place, he puts you under a sort of sequestration."

"He sequestrates me! Do you mean to say I am sequestrated?"

"I think so."

"I wish you would have the goodness to prove that to me."

"Nothing easier. Do you ever go out?"

"Never."

"Do you ever ride on horseback?"

"Never."

"Are your friends allowed to come and see you?"

"Never."

"Very well, then; never to go out, never to ride on horseback, never to be allowed to see your friends, that is called being sequestrated."

"But why should Aramis sequestrate me?" inquired Porthos.

"Come," said D'Artagnan, "be frank, Porthos."

"As gold."

"It was Aramis who drew the plan of the fortifications at Belle-Isle, was it not?"

Porthos colored as he said, "Yes; but that was all he did."

"Exactly, and my own opinion is that it was no very great affair after all."

"That is mine, too."

"Very good; I am delighted we are of the same opinion."

"He never even came to Belle-Isle," said Porthos.

"There now, you see."

"It was I who went to Vannes, as you may have seen."

"Say, rather, as I did see. Well, that is precisely the state of my case, my dear Porthos. Aramis, who only drew the plans, wishes to pass himself off as the engineer, while you, who, stone by stone, built the wall, the citadel, and the bastions, he wishes to reduce to the rank of a mere builder."

"By builder, you mean mason, perhaps?"

"Mason; the very word."

"Plasterer, in fact?"

"Precisely."

"A laborer?"

"Exactly."

"Oh! oh! my dear Aramis, you seem to think you are only twenty-five years of age still."

"Yes, and that is not all, for he believes you are fifty."

"I should have amazingly liked to have seen him at work."

"Yes, indeed."

"A fellow who has got the gout?"

"Yes."

"Who has lost three of his teeth?"

"Four."

"While I—look at mine." And Porthos, opening his large mouth very wide, displayed two rows of teeth rather less white than snow, but as even, hard, and sound as ivory.

"You can hardly believe, Porthos," said D'Artagnan,

"what a fancy the king has for good teeth. Yours decide me; I will present you to the king myself."

"You?"

"Why not? Do you think I have less credit at court than Aramis?"

"Oh, no!"

"Do you think that I have the slightest pretension upon the fortifications at Belle-Isle?"

"Certainly not."

"It is your own interest alone which would induce me to do it."

"I don't doubt it in the least."

"Well, I am the intimate friend of the king; and a proof of that is, that whenever there is anything disagreeable to tell him, it is I who have to do it."

"But, dear D'Artagnan, if you present me——"

"Well?"

"Aramis will be angry."

"With me?"

"No, with me."

"Bah! whether he or I present you, since you are to be presented, what does it matter?"

"They were going to get me some clothes made."

"Your own are splendid."

"Oh! those I had ordered were far more beautiful."

"Take care; the king likes simplicity."

"In that case, I will be simple. But what will Monsieur Fouquet say when he learns that I have left?"

"Are you a prisoner, then, on parole?"

"No, not quite that. But I promised him I would not leave without letting him know."

"Wait a minute; we shall return to that presently. Have you anything to do here?"

"I, nothing; nothing of any importance, at least."

"Unless, indeed, you are Aramis' representative for something of importance."

"By no means."

"What I tell you—pray understand that—is out of interest for you. I suppose, for instance, that you are commissioned to send messages and letters to him?"

"Ah! letters—yes. I send certain letters to him."

"Where?"

"To Fontainebleau."

"Have you any letters, then?"

"But——"

"Nay, let me speak. Have you any letters, I say?"

"I have just received one for him."

"Interesting?"

"I suppose so."

"You do not read them, then?"

"I am not at all curious," said Porthos, as he drew out of his pocket the soldier's letter which Porthos had not read, but which D'Artagnan had.

"Do you know what to do with it?" said D'Artagnan.

"Of course; do as I always do, send it to him."

"Not so."

"Why not? Keep it, then?"

"Did they not tell you that this letter was very important?"

"Very important."

"Well, you must take it yourself to Fontainebleau."

"To Aramis?"

"Yes."

"Very good."

"And since the king is there——"

"You will profit by that."

"I shall profit by the opportunity to present you to the king."

"Ah! D'Artagnan, there is no one like you to find expedients."

"Therefore, instead of forwarding to our friend any messages, which may or may not be faithfully delivered, we will ourselves be the bearers of the letter."

"I had never even thought of that, and yet it is simple enough."

"And, therefore, because it is urgent, Porthos, we ought to set off at once."

"In fact," said Porthos, "the sooner we set off the less chance there is of Aramis' letter meeting with any delay."

"Porthos, your reasoning is always very accurate, and, in your case, logic seems to serve as an auxiliary to the imagination."

"Do you think so?" said Porthos.

"It is the result of your hard reading," replied D'Artagnan. "So come along, let us be off."

"But," said Porthos, "my promise to Monsieur Fouquet?"

"Which?"

"Not to leave St. Mandé without telling him of it."

"Ah, Porthos!" said D'Artagnan, "how very young you are!"

"In what way?"

"You are going to Fontainebleau, are you not, where you will find Monsieur Fouquet?"

"Yes."

"Probably in the king's palace?"

"Yes," repeated Porthos, with an air full of majesty.

"Well, you will accost him with these words: 'Monsieur Fouquet, I have the honor to inform you that I have just left St. Mandé.' "

"And," said Porthos, with the same majestic mien, "seeing me at Fontainebleau at the king's, Monsieur Fouquet will not be able to tell me I am not speaking the truth."

"My dear Porthos, I was just on the point of opening my lips to make the same remark, but you anticipate me in everything. Oh! Porthos, how fortunately you are gifted; age has not made any impression on you."

"Not overmuch, certainly."

"Then there is nothing more to say?"

"I think not."

"All your scruples are removed?"

"Quite so."

"In that case I shall carry you off with me."

"Exactly; and I shall go and get my horse saddled."

"You have horses here, then?"

"I have five."

"You had them sent from Pierrefonds, I suppose?"

"No, Monsieur Fouquet gave them to me."

"My dear Porthos we shall not want five horses for two persons; besides, I have already three in Paris, which will make eight, and that will be too many."

"It would not be too many if I had some of my servants here; but, alas! I have not got them."

"Do you regret them then?"

"I regret Mousqueton; I need Mousqueton."

"What a good-hearted fellow you are, Porthos," said D'Artagnan; "but the best thing you can do is to leave your horses here, as you have left Mousqueton out yonder."

"Why so?"

"Because, by and by, it might turn out a very good thing if Monsieur Fouquet had never given you anything at all."

"I don't understand you," said Porthos.

"It is not necessary you should understand."

"But yet——"

"I will explain to you later, Porthos."

"I'll wager it is some piece of policy or other."

"And of the most subtle character," returned D'Artagnan.

Porthos bent his head at this word policy; then, after a moment's reflection, he added, "I confess, D'Artagnan, that I am no politician."

"I know that well."

"Oh! no one knows what you told me yourself, you, the bravest of the brave."

"What did I tell you, Porthos?"

"That every man has his day. You told me so, and I have experienced it myself. There are certain days when one feels less pleasure than others in exposing one's self to a bullet or a sword-thrust."

"Exactly my own idea."

"And mine, too, although I can hardly believe in blows or thrusts which kill outright."

"The deuce! and yet you have killed a few in your time."

"Yes; but I have never been killed."

"Your reason is a very good one."

"Therefore, I do not believe I shall ever die from a thrust of a sword or a gunshot."

"In that case, then, you are afraid of nothing. Ah! water perhaps?"

"Oh! I swim like an otter."

"Of a quartan fever, then?"

"I never had one yet, and I don't believe I ever shall; but there is one thing I will admit," and Porthos dropped his voice.

"What is that?" asked D'Artagnan, adopting the same tone of voice as Porthos.

"I must confess," repeated Porthos, "that I am horribly afraid of political matters."

"Ah! bah!" exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"Upon my word, it's true," said Porthos, in a stentorian voice. "I have seen His Eminence Monsieur le Cardinal de Richelieu, and His Eminence Monsieur le Cardinal de Mazarin; the one was a red politician, the other a black politician; I have never felt very much more satisfied with the one than with the other; the first struck off the heads of Monsieur de Marillac, Monsieur de Thou, Monsieur de Cinq-Mars, Monsieur Châlais, Monsieur de Boutteville, and Monsieur de Montmorency; the second got a whole crowd of Frondeurs cut in pieces, and we belonged to them."

"On the contrary, we did not belong to them," said D'Artagnan.

"Oh! indeed, yes; for, if I unsheathed my sword for the cardinal, I struck for the king."

"Dear Porthos!"

"Well, I have done. My dread of politics is such that if there is any question of politics in the matter, I should far sooner prefer to return to Pierrefonds."

"You would be quite right, if that were the case. But with me, dear Porthos, no politics at all, that is quite clear. You have labored hard in fortifying Belle-Isle; the king wished to know the name of the clever engineer under whose directions the works were carried on; you are modest, as all men of true genius are; perhaps Aramis wishes to put you under a bushel. But I happen to seize hold of you; I make it known who you are; I produce you; the king rewards you; and that is the only policy I have to do with."

"And the only one I will have to do with, either," said Porthos, holding out his hand to D'Artagnan.

But D'Artagnan knew Porthos' grasp; he knew that once imprisoned within the baron's five fingers, no hand ever left it without being half-crushed. He therefore held out, not his hand, but his fist, and Porthos did not even perceive the difference. The servants talked a little with each other in an undertone, and whispered a few words, which D'Artagnan understood, but which he took very good care not to let Porthos understand. "Our friend," he said to himself, "was really and truly Aramis' prisoner Let us now see what the result will be of the liberation of the captive."

CHAPTER IV.

THE RAT AND THE CHEESE.

D'Artagnan and Porthos returned on foot, as D'Artagnan had arrived. When D'Artagnan, as he entered the shop of the Pilon d'Or, had announced to Planchet that M. du Vallon would be one of the privileged travelers, and when the plume in Porthos' hat had made the wooden candles suspended over the front jingle together, something almost like a melancholy presentiment troubled the delight which Planchet had promised himself for the next day. But the grocer's heart was of sterling metal, a precious relic of the good old time, which always remains what it has always been for those who are getting old the time of

their youth, and for those who are young the old age of their ancestors. Planchet, notwithstanding the sort of internal shiver, which he checked immediately he experienced it, received Porthos, therefore, with a respect mingled with the most tender cordiality. Porthos, who was a little cold and stiff in his manners at first, on account of the social difference which existed at that period between a baron and a grocer, soon began to get a little softened when he perceived so much good feeling and so many kind attentions in Planchet. He was particularly touched by the liberty which was permitted him to plunge his large hands into the boxes of dried fruits and preserves, into the sacks of nuts and almonds, and into the drawers full of sweetmeats. So that, notwithstanding Planchet's pressing invitations to go upstairs to the *entresol*, he chose as his favorite seat, during the evening which he had to spend at Planchet's house, the shop itself, where his fingers could always find whatever his nose had first detected for him. The delicious figs from Provence, filberts from the forest, Tours plums, were subjects of his uninterrupted attention for five consecutive hours. His teeth, like millstones, cracked heaps of nuts, the shells of which were scattered all over the floor, where they were trampled by every one who went in and out of the shop; Porthos pulled from the stalk with his lips, at one mouthful, bunches of the rich Muscatel raisins with their beautiful bloom, and a half pound of which passed at one gulp from his mouth to his stomach. In one of the corners of the shop, Planchet's assistants, crouching down in a fright, looked at each other without venturing to open their lips. They did not know who Porthos was, for they had never seen him before. The race of those Titans who had worn the cuirasses of Hugues Capet, Philip Augustus, and Francis I. had already begun to disappear. They could not help thinking he might possibly be the ogre of the fairy tale, who was going to turn the whole contents of Planchet's shop into his insatiable stomach, and that, too, without in the slightest degree displacing the barrels and chests that were in it. Cracking, munching, chewing, nibbling, sucking, and swallowing, Porthos occasionally said to the grocer:

"You do a very good business here, friend Planchet."

"He will very soon have none at all to do if this continues," grumbled the foreman, who had Planchet's word that he should be his successor. And in his despair, he approached Porthos, who blocked up the whole of the passage

leading from the back shop to the shop itself. He hoped that Porthos would rise, and that this movement would distract his devouring ideas.

"What do you want, my man?" asked Porthos very affably.

"I should like to pass you, monsieur, if it is not troubling you too much."

"Very well," said Porthos; "it does not trouble me in the least."

At the same moment he took hold of the young fellow by the waistband, lifted him off the ground, and placed him very gently on the other side, smiling all the while with the same affable expression. As soon as Porthos had placed him on the ground, the lad's legs so shook under him that he fell back upon some sacks of corks. But noticing the giant's gentleness of manner, he ventured again, and said:

"Ah, monsieur! pray be careful."

"What about?" inquired Porthos.

"You are positively putting fire into your body."

"How is that, my good fellow?" said Porthos.

"All those things are very heating to the system."

"Which?"

"Raisins, nuts, and almonds."

"Yes; but if raisins, nuts, and almonds are heating——"

"There is no doubt at all of it, monsieur."

"Honey is very cooling," said Porthos, stretching out his hand toward a small barrel of honey which was opened, and he plunged the scoop, with which the wants of the customers were supplied, into it, and swallowed a good half pound at one gulp.

"I must trouble you for some water now, my man," said Porthos.

"In a pail, monsieur?" asked the lad simply.

"No, in a water-bottle; that will be quite enough;" and raising the bottle to his mouth, as a trumpeter does his trumpet, he emptied the bottle at a single draught.

Planchet was moved in all the sentiments which correspond to the fibers of propriety and self-love. However, a worthy representative of the hospitality which prevailed in early days, he feigned to be talking very earnestly with D'Artagnan, and incessantly repeated: "Ah! monsieur, what a happiness! what an honor!"

"What time shall we have supper, Planchet?" inquired Porthos; "I feel hungry."

The foreman clasped his hands together. The two others

got under the counters, fearing that Porthos might have a taste for human flesh.

"We shall only take a sort of snack here," said D'Artagnan; "and when we get to Planchet's country-seat we shall have supper."

"Ah! ah! so we are going to your country house, Planchet," said Porthos; "so much the better."

"You overwhelm me, Monsieur le Baron."

The "Monsieur le Baron" had a great effect upon the men, who detected a personage of the highest quality in an appetite of that kind. They had never heard that an ogre was ever called "Monsieur le Baron."

"I will take a few biscuits to eat on the road," said Porthos carelessly; and he emptied a whole jar of aniseed biscuits into the huge pocket of his doublet.

"My shop is saved!" exclaimed Planchet.

"Yes, as the cheese was," said the foreman.

"What cheese?"

"That Dutch cheese, inside which a rat had made his way, and we only found the rind left."

Planchet looked all round his shop, and observing the different articles which had escaped Porthos' teeth, he found the comparison somewhat exaggerated. The foreman, who remarked what was passing in his master's mind, said: "Take care; he is not gone yet."

"Have you any fruit here?" said Porthos, as he went upstairs to the *entresol,* where it had just been announced that some refreshment was prepared.

"Alas!" thought the grocer, addressing a look at D'Artagnan full of entreaty, which the latter half-understood.

As soon as they had finished eating they set off. It was late when the three riders, who had left Paris about six in the evening, arrived at Fontainebleau. The journey had passed very agreeably. Porthos took a fancy to Planchet's society, because the latter was very respectful in his manners, and seemed delighted to talk to him about his meadows, his woods, and his rabbit-warrens. Porthos had all the taste and pride of a landed proprietor. When D'Artagnan saw his two companions in earnest conversation, he took the opposite side of the road, and letting his bridle drop upon his horse's neck, separated himself from the whole world, as he had done from Porthos and Planchet. The moon shone softly through the foliage of the forest. The odors of the open country rose deliciously perfumed to

the horses' nostrils, and they snorted and pranced about delightedly. Porthos and Planchet began to talk about hay crops. Planchet admitted to Porthos that in the more advanced years of his life he had certainly neglected agricultural pursuits for commerce, but that his childhood had been passed in Picardy in the beautiful meadows where the grass grew as high as the knees, and where he had played under the green apple-trees covered with red-cheeked fruit; he went on to say that he had solemnly promised himself that as soon as he should have made his fortune he would return to nature, and end his days, as he had begun them, as near as he possibly could to the earth itself, where all men must go at last.

"Eh, eh!" said Porthos, "in that case, my dear Monsieur Planchet, your retreat is not far distant."

"How so?"

"Why, you seem to be in the way of making your fortune very soon."

"Well, we are getting on pretty well, I must admit."

"Come, tell me what is the extent of your ambition, and what is the amount you intend to retire upon?"

"There is one circumstance, monsieur," said Planchet without answering the question, "which occasions me a good deal of anxiety."

"What is it?" inquired Porthos, looking all round him as if in search of the circumstance that annoyed Planchet, and desirous of freeing him from it.

"Why, formerly," said the grocer, "you used to call me Planchet quite short, and you would have spoken to me then in a much more familiar manner than you do now."

"Certainly, certainly, I should have said so formerly," replied the good-natured Porthos, with an embarrassment full of delicacy, "but formerly——"

"Formerly I was Monsieur d'Artagnan's lackey; is not that what you mean?"

"Yes."

"Well, if I am not quite his lackey, I am as much as ever I was his devoted servant; and more than that, since that time——"

"Well, Planchet?"

"Since that time, I have had the honor of being in partnership with him."

"Oh! oh!" said Porthos. "What, has D'Artagnan gone into the grocery business?"

"No, no," said D'Artagnan, whom these words had drawn out of his reverie, and who entered into the conversation with that readiness and rapidity which distinguished every operation of his mind and body. "It was not D'Artagnan who entered into the grocery business, but Planchet who entered into a political affair with me."

"Yes," said Planchet, with mingled pride and satisfaction, "we transacted a little business which brought me in one hundred thousand francs, and Monsieur d'Artagnan two hundred thousand francs."

"Oh! oh!" said Porthos, with admiration.

"So that, Monsieur le Baron," continued the grocer, "I again beg you to be kind enough to call me Planchet, as you used to do; and to speak to me as familiarly as in old times. You cannot possibly imagine the pleasure that it would give me."

"If that be the case, my dear Planchet, I will do so, certainly," replied Porthos. And as he was quite close to Planchet, he raised his hand, as if to strike him on the shoulder, in token of friendly cordiality; but a fortunate movement of the horse made him miss his aim, so that his hand fell on the crupper of Planchet's horse, instead; which made the animal's legs almost give way.

D'Artagnan burst out laughing, as he said, "Take care, Planchet, for if Porthos begins to like you so much he will caress you, and if he caresses you, he will knock you as flat as a pancake. Porthos is still as strong as ever, you know."

"Oh!" said Planchet, "Mousqueton is not dead, and yet Monsieur le Baron is very fond of him."

"Certainly," said Porthos, with a sigh which made all the three horses rear; "and I was only saying, this very morning, to D'Artagnan, how much I regretted him. But tell me, Planchet?"

"Thank you, Monsieur le Baron, thank you."

"Good lad, good lad! How many acres of park have you got?"

"Of park?"

"Yes; we will reckon up the meadows presently, and the woods afterward."

"Whereabouts, monsieur?"

"At your château."

"Oh, Monsieur le Baron; I have neither château, nor park, nor meadows, nor woods."

"What have you got, then?" inquired Porthos, "and why do you call it a country-seat?"

"I did not call it a country-seat, Monsieur le Baron," replied Planchet, somewhat humiliated, "but a country box."

"Ah! ah! I understand. You are modest."

"No, Monsieur le Baron; I speak the plain truth. I have rooms for a couple of friends, that's all."

"But in that case, whereabouts do your friends walk?"

"In the first place, they can walk about the king's forest, which is very beautiful."

"Yes, I know the forest is very fine," said Porthos; "nearly as beautiful as my forest at Berry."

Planchet opened his eyes very wide. "Have you a forest of the same kind as the forest at Fontainebleau, Monsieur le Baron?" he stammered out.

"Yes; I have two, indeed, but the one at Berry is my favorite."

"Why so?" asked Planchet.

"Because I don't know where it ends; and, also, because it is full of poachers."

"How can the poachers make the forest so agreeable to you?"

"Because they hunt my game, and I hunt them—which, in these peaceful times, is for me a picture of war on a small scale."

They had reached this turn of the conversation when Planchet, looking up, perceived the house at the commencement of Fontainebleau, the outline of which stood out strongly upon the dark face of the heavens; while, rising above the compact and irregularly formed mass of buildings, the pointed roofs of the château were clearly visible, the slates of which glistened beneath the light of the moon, like the scales of an immense fish. "Gentlemen," said Planchet, "I have the honor to inform you that we have arrived at Fontainebleau."

CHAPTER V.

PLANCHET'S COUNTRY HOUSE.

The cavaliers looked up, and saw that what Planchet had announced to them was true. Ten minutes afterward they were in the street called the Rue de Lyon, on the opposite side of the inn of the sign of the Beau Paon. A high hedge of bushy elders, hawthorn, and wild hops formed an impenetrable fence, behind which rose a white house, with a

large tiled roof. Two of the windows, which were quite dark, looked upon the street. Between the two a small door, with a porch supported by a couple of pillars, formed the entrance to the house. The door was gained by a step raised a little from the ground. Planchet got off his horse, as if he intended to knock at the door; but on second thought, he took hold of his horse by the bridle, and led it about thirty paces further on, his two companions following him. He then advanced about another thirty paces, until he arrived at the door of a cart-house lighted by an iron grating, and, lifting up a wooden latch, pushed open one of the folding-doors. He entered first, leading his horse after him by the bridle, into a small courtyard, where an odor met them which revealed their close vicinity to a stable. "That smells all right," said Porthos loudly, getting off his horse, "and I almost begin to think I am near my own cows at Pierrefonds."

"I have only one cow," Planchet hastened to say modestly.

"And I have thirty," said Porthos; "or rather, I don't exactly know how many I have."

When the two cavaliers had entered Planchet fastened the door behind them. In the meantime, D'Artagnan, who had dismounted with his usual agility, inhaled the fresh perfumed air with the delight a Parisian feels at the sight of green fields and fresh foliage, plucked a piece of honeysuckle with one hand, and of sweetbrier with the other. Porthos had laid hold of some pease which were twined round poles stuck into the ground, and ate, or rather browsed upon them, shells and all, and Planchet was busily engaged trying to wake up an old and infirm peasant, who was fast asleep in a shed, lying on a bed of moss, and dressed in an old stable suit of clothes. The peasant, recognizing Planchet, called him "the master," to the grocer's great satisfaction. "Stable the horses well, old fellow, and you shall have something good for yourself," said Planchet.

"Yes, yes; fine animals they are, too," said the peasant. "Oh! they shall have as much as they like."

"Gently, my man," said D'Artagnan, "we are getting on a little too fast. A few oats, and a good bed—nothing more."

"Some bran and water for my horse," said Porthos, "for it is very warm, I think."

"Don't be afraid, gentlemen," replied Planchet; "Daddy Celestin is an old gendarme who fought at Ivry. He knows

all about stables; so come into the house." And he led the way along a well-sheltered walk, which crossed a kitchen-garden, then a small paddock, and came out into a little garden behind the house, the principal front of which, as we have already noticed, was facing the street. As they approached they could see, through the two open windows on the ground floor, which led into a sitting-room, the interior of Planchet's residence. This room, softly lighted by a lamp placed on the table, seemed, from the end of the garden, like a smiling image of repose, comfort, and happiness. In every direction where the rays of light fell, whether upon a piece of old china or upon an article of furniture shining from excessive neatness, or upon the weapons hanging against the wall, the soft light was as softly reflected; and its rays seemed to linger everywhere upon something or another agreeable to the eye. The lamp which lighted the room, while the foliage of jasmine and climbing roses hung in masses from the window-frames, splendidly illuminated a damask tablecloth as white as snow. The table was laid for two persons. An amber-colored wine sparkled in the long cut-glass bottle, and a large jug of blue china, with a silver lid, was filled with foaming cider Near the table, in a high-backed armchair, reclined fast asleep a woman of about thirty years of age, her face the very picture of health and freshness. Upon her knees lay a large cat, with her paws folded under her, and her eyes half-closed, purring in that significant manner which, according to feline habits, indicates perfect contentment. The two friends paused before the window, in complete amazement, while Planchet, perceiving their astonishment, was, in no little degree, secretly delighted at it."

"Ah! Planchet, you rascal," said D'Artagnan, "I now understand your absences."

"Oh! oh! there is some white linen!" said Porthos, in his turn, in a voice of thunder. At the sound of this voice the cat took flight, the housekeeper woke up suddenly, and Planchet, assuming a gracious air, introduced his two companions into the room, where the table was already laid.

"Permit me, my dear," he said, "to present to you Monsieur le Chevalier d'Artagnan, my patron." D'Artagnan took the lady's hand in his in the most courteous manner, and with precisley the same chivalrous air as he would have taken madame's.

"Monsieur le Baron du Vallon de Bracieux de Pierrefonds," added Planchet. Porthos bowed with a reverence of which Anne of Austria would have approved.

It was then Planchet's turn, and he unhesitatingly embraced the lady in question, not, however, until he had made a sign as if requesting D'Artagnan's and Porthos' permission, a permission which was of course frankly conceded. D'Artagnan complimented Planchet, and said, "You are indeed a man who knows how to make life agreeable."

"Life, monsieur," said Planchet, laughing, "is a capital which a man ought to invest as sensibly as he possibly can."

"And you get very good interest for yours," said Porthos, with a burst of laughter like a peal of thunder.

Planchet turned to his housekeeper. "You have before you," he said to her, "the two men who have influenced no small portion of my life. I have spoken to you about them both very frequently."

"And to others as well," said the lady, with a very decided Flemish accent.

"Madame is Dutch?" inquired D'Artagnan. Porthos curled his mustache, a circumstance which was not lost upon D'Artagnan, who remarked everything.

"I am from Antwerp," said the lady.

"And her name is Madame Gechter," said Planchet.

"You should not call her madame," said D'Artagnan.

"Why not?" asked Planchet.

"Because it would make her seem older every time you call her so."

"Well, I call her Trüchen."

"And a very pretty name, too," said Porthos.

"Trüchen," said Planchet, "came to me from Flanders with her virtue and two thousand florins. She ran away from a brute of a husband who was in the habit of beating her. Being myself a Picard born, I was always very fond of the Artesian women, and it is only a step from Artois to Flanders; she came crying bitterly to her godfather, my predecessor in the Rue des Lombards; she placed her two thousand florins in my establishment, which I have turned to very good account, and which bring her in ten thousand."

"Bravo, Planchet!"

"She is free and well off; she has a cow, a maid-servant, and old Celestin at her orders; she mends my linen, knits my winter stockings; she only sees me every fortnight, and seems anxious to make herself happy."

"And I am very happy indeed," said Trüchen, with perfect ingenuousness.

Porthos began to curl the other side of his mustache.

"The deuce," thought D'Artagnan, "can Porthos have any intentions in that quarter?"

In the meantime Trüchen had set her cook to work, had laid the table for two more, and covered it with every possible delicacy, which converts a light supper into a substantial meal, and a meal into a regular feast. Fresh butter, salt beef, anchovies, tunny, a shopful of Planchet's commodities, fowls, vegetables, salad, fish from the pond and the river, game from the forest—all the produce, in fact, of the province. Moreover, Planchet returned from the cellar, laden with ten bottles of wine, the glass of which could hardly be seen for the thick coating of dust which covered them. Porthos' heart seemed to expand as he said, "I am hungry," and he sat himself beside Mme. Trüchen, whom he looked at in the most killing manner. D'Artagnan seated himself on the other side of her, while Planchet, discreetly and full of delight, took his seat opposite.

"Do not trouble yourselves," he said, "if Trüchen should leave the table now and then during supper; for she will have to look after your bedrooms."

In fact, the housekeeper made her escape very frequently, and they could hear, on the first floor above them, the creaking of the wooden bedsteads and the rolling of the castors on the floor. While this was going on the three men, Porthos especially, ate and drank gloriously—it was wonderful to see them. The ten full bottles were ten empty ones by the time Trüchen returned with the cheese. D'Artagnan still preserved his dignity and self-possession, but Porthos had lost a portion of his; the mirth soon began to be somewhat uproarious. D'Artagnan recommended a new descent into the cellar, and, as Planchet did not walk with the steadiness of a well-trained foot-soldier, the captain of the musketeers proposed to accompany him. They set off, humming songs wild enough to frighten anybody who might be listening. Trüchen remained behind at table with Porthos. While the two wine-bibbers were looking behind the firewood for what they wanted, a sharp sonorous sound was heard like the impression of a pair of lips on a cheek.

"Porthos fancies himself at La Rochelle," thought D'Artagnan, as they returned freighted with bottles. Planchet was singing so loudly that he was incapable of noticing anything. D'Artagnan, whom nothing ever escaped, remarked how much redder Trüchen's left cheek was than her right.

Porthos was sitting on Trüchen's left, and was curling with both his hands both sides of his mustache at once, and Trüchen was looking at him with a most bewitching smile. The sparkling wine of Anjou very soon produced a remarkable effect upon the three companions. D'Artagnan had hardly strength enough left to take the candlestick to light Planchet up his own staircase. Planchet was pulling Porthos along, who was following Trüchen, who was herself jovial enough. It was D'Artagnan who found out the rooms and the beds. Porthos threw himself into the one destined for him, after his friend had undressed him. D'Artagnan got into his own bed, saying to himself, "*Mordioux!* I had made up my mind never to touch that light-colored wine which brings my early camp days back again. Fy! fy! if my musketeers were only to see their captain in such a state." And drawing the curtains of his bed, he added, "Fortunately enough, though, they will not see me."

"The country is very amusing," said Porthos, stretching out his legs, which passed through the wooden footboard, and made a tremendous noise, of which, however, no one in the house was capable of taking the slightest notice. By two o'clock in the morning every one was fast asleep.

CHAPTER VI.

SHOWING WHAT COULD BE SEEN FROM PLANCHET'S HOUSE.

The next morning found the three heroes sleeping soundly. Trüchen had closed the outside blinds to keep the first rays of the sun from the heavy eyes of her guests, like a kind, good woman. It was still perfectly dark, then, beneath Porthos' curtains and under Planchet's canopy, when D'Artagnan, awakened by an indiscreet ray of light which made its way through the windows, jumped hastily out of bed, as if he wished to be the first at the assault. He took by assault Porthos' room, which was next to his own. The worthy Porthos was sleeping with a noise like distant thunder; in the dim obscurity of the room his gigantic frame was prominently displayed, and his swollen fist hung down outside the bed upon the carpet. D'Artagnan awoke Porthos, who rubbed his eyes in a tolerably good humor. In the meantime, Planchet was dressing himself, and met at their bedroom doors his two guests, who were still somewhat unsteady from their previous evening's

entertainment. Although it was yet very early, the whole household was already up. The cook was mercilessly slaughtering poultry in the poultry-yard, and Celestin was gathering cherries in the garden. Porthos, brisk and lively as ever, held out his hand to Planchet, and D'Artagnan requested permission to embrace Mme. Trüchen. The latter, to show that she bore no ill-will, approached Porthos, upon whom she conferred the same favor. Porthos embraced Mme. Trüchen, heaving an enormous sigh. Planchet took both his friends by the hand.

"I am going to show you over the house," he said; "when we arrived last evening it was as dark as an oven, and we were unable to see anything; but in broad daylight everything looks different, and you will be satisfied, I hope."

"If we begin by the view you have," said D'Artagnan, "that charms me beyond everything; I have always lived in royal mansions, you know, and royal personages have some very good ideas upon the selection of points of view."

"I am a great stickler for a good view myself," said Porthos. "At my Château de Pierrefonds, I have had four avenues laid out, at the end of each is a landscape of a different character altogether to the others."

"You shall see my prospect," said Planchet; and he led his two guests to a window.

"Ah!" said D'Artagnan, "this is the Rue de Lyon."

"Yes, I have two windows on this side, a paltry, insignificant view, for there is always that bustling and noisy inn, which is a very disagreeable neighbor. I had four windows here, but I have only kept two."

"Let us go on," said D'Artagnan.

They entered a corridor leading to the bedrooms, and Planchet pushed open the outside blinds.

"Halloo! what is that out yonder?" said Porthos.

"The forest," said Planchet. "It is the horizon, a thick line of green, which is yellow in the spring, green in the summer, red in the autumn, and white in the winter."

"All very well, but it is like a curtain, which prevents one seeing a greater distance."

"Yes," said Planchet; "still one can see, at all events, everything between."

"Ah, the open country," said Porthos. "But what is that I see out there—crosses and stones?"

"Ah! that is the cemetery," exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"Precisely," said Planchet, "I assure you it is very curious. Hardly a day passes that some one is not buried

there; for Fontainebleau is by no means an inconsiderable place. Sometimes we see young girls clothed in white carrying banners; at others, some of the town council, or rich citizens, with choristers and all the parish authorities; and then, too, we see some of the officers of the king's household."

"I should not like that," said Porthos.

"There is not much amusement in it, at all events," said D'Artagnan.

"I assure you it encourages religious thoughts," replied Planchet.

"Oh, I don't deny that."

"But," continued Planchet, "we must all die one day or another, and I once met with a maxim somewhere which I have remembered, that the thought of death is a thought that will do us all good."

"I am far from saying the contrary," said Porthos.

"But," objected D'Artagnan, "the thought of green fields, flowers, rivers, blue horizons, extensive and boundless plains, is no less likely to do us good."

"If I had any, I should be far from rejecting them," said Planchet; "but possessing only this little cemetery, full of flowers, so moss-grown, shady, and quiet, I am contented with it, and I think of those who live in town, in the Rue des Lombards, for instance, and who have to listen to the rumbling of a couple of thousand vehicles every day, and to the trampling of a hundred and fifty thousand foot passengers."

"But living," said Porthos; "living, remember that."

"That is exactly the reason," said Planchet timidly, "why I feel it does me good to see a few dead."

"Upon my word," said D'Artagnan, "that fellow Planchet was born to be a poet as well as a grocer."

"Monsieur," said Planchet, "I am one of those good-humored sort of men whom Heaven created for the purpose of living a certain space of time, and of considering all things good which they meet with during their stay on earth."

D'Artagnan sat down close to the window, and as there seemed to be something substantial in Planchet's philosophy, he mused over it.

"Ah! ah!" exclaimed Porthos, "if I am not mistaken, we are going to have a representation now, for I think I heard something like chanting."

"Yes," said D'Artagnan, "I hear singing, too."

"Oh, it is only a burial of a very poor description," said Planchet disdainfully; "the officiating priest, the beadle, and one chorister boy, nothing more. You observe, messieurs, that the defunct lady or gentleman could not have been of very high rank."

"No; no one seems to be following the coffin."

"Yes," said Porthos; "I see a man."

"You are right; a man wrapped up in a cloak," said D'Artagnan.

"It's not worth looking at," said Planchet.

"I find it interesting," said D'Artagnan, leaning on the window.

"Come, come, you are beginning to take a fancy to the place already," said Planchet delightedly; "it is exactly my own case. I was so melancholy at first that I could do nothing but make the sign of the cross all day, and the chants were like nails being driven into my head; but now, the chants lull me to sleep, and no bird I have ever seen or heard can sing better than those which are to be met with in this cemetery."

"Well," said Porthos, "this is beginning to get a little dull for me, and I prefer going downstairs."

Planchet with one bound was beside his guest, to whom he offered his hand to lead him into the garden.

"What!" said Porthos to D'Artagnan, as he turned round, "are you going to remain here?"

"Yes; I shall join you presently."

"Well, Monsieur d'Artagnan is right, after all," said Planchet; "are they beginning to bury yet?"

"Not yet."

"Ah! yes, the grave-digger is waiting until the cords are fastened round the bier. But, see, a woman has just entered the cemetery at the other end."

"Yes, yes, my dear Planchet," said D'Artagnan quickly, "leave me, leave me. I feel I am beginning already to be much comforted by my meditations, so do not interrupt me."

Planchet left, and D'Artagnan remained, devouring with his eager gaze from behind the half-closed blinds what was taking place just before him. The two bearers of the corpse had unfastened the straps by which they had carried the litter, and were letting their burden glide gently into the open grave. At a few paces distant, the man with the cloak wrapped round him, the only spectator of this melancholy scene, was leaning with his back against a large

cypress-tree, and kept his face and person entirely concealed from the grave-diggers and the priests; the corpse was buried in five minutes. The grave having been filled up, the priests turned away, and the grave-digger having addressed a few words to them, followed them as they moved away. The man in the mantle bowed as they passed him, and put a piece of money into the grave-digger's hand.

"*Mordioux!*" murmured D'Artagnan; "why, that man is Aramis himself."

Aramis, in fact, remained alone, on that side at least; for hardly had he turned his head than a woman's footsteps and the rustling of her dress were heard in the path close to him. He immediately turned round, and took off his hat with the most ceremonious respect; he led the lady under the shelter of some walnut and lime-trees which overshadowed a magnificent tomb.

"Ah! who would have thought it," said D'Artagnan; "the Bishop of Vannes at a rendezvous! He is still the same Abbé Aramis as he was at Noisy le Sec. Yes," he added, after a pause; "but as it is in a cemetery, the rendezvous is sacred."

And he began to laugh.

The conversation lasted for fully half an hour. D'Artagnan could not see the lady's face, for she kept her back toward him; but he saw perfectly well, by the erect attitude of both the speakers, by their gestures, by the measured and careful manner with which they glanced at each other, either by way of attack or defense, that they must be conversing about any other subject than that of love. At the end of the conversation the lady rose and bowed most profoundly to Aramis.

"Oh! oh!" said D'Artagnan; "this rendezvous finishes like one of a very tender nature, though. The cavalier kneels at the beginning, the young lady by and by gets tamed down, and then it is she who has to supplicate. Who is this girl? I would give anything to ascertain."

This seemed impossible, however, for Aramis was the first to leave; the lady carefully concealed her head and face, and then immediately separated. D'Artagnan could hold out no longer; he ran to the window which looked out on the Rue de Lyon, and saw Aramis just entering the inn. The lady was proceeding in quite an opposite direction, and seemed, in fact, to be about to rejoin an equipage, consisting of two led horses and a carriage, which he could see standing close to the borders of the forest. She was walk-

ing slowly, her head bent down, absorbed in the deepest meditation.

"*Mordioux! mordioux!* I must and will learn who that woman is," said the musketeer again; and then, without further deliberation, he set off in pursuit of her. As he was passing along, he tried to think how he could possibly contrive to make her raise her veil. "She is not young," he said, "and is a woman of high rank in society. I ought to know that figure and peculiar style of walk." As he ran, the sound of his spurs and of his boots upon the hard ground of the street made a strange, jingling noise; a fortunate circumstance in itself, which he was far from reckoning upon. The noise disturbed the lady; she seemed to fancy she was being either followed or pursued, which was indeed the case, and turned round. D'Artagnan started as if he had received a charge of small shot in his legs, and then turning round as if he were going back the same way he had come, he murmured, "Madame de Chevreuse!" D'Artagnan would not go home until he had learned everything. He asked Celestin to inquire of the grave-digger whose body it was they had buried that morning.

"A poor Franciscan mendicant friar," replied the latter, "who had not even a dog to love him in this world, and to accompany him to his last resting-place."

"If that were really the case," thought D'Artagnan, "we should not have found Aramis present at his funeral. The Bishop of Vannes is not precisely a dog as far as devotion goes; his scent, however, is quite as keen, I admit."

CHAPTER VII.

HOW PORTHOS, TRUCHEN AND PLANCHET PARTED WITH ONE ANOTHER ON FRIENDLY TERMS, THANKS TO D'ARTAGNAN.

THERE was good living in Planchet's house. Porthos broke a ladder and two cherry-trees, stripped the raspberry-bushes, and was only unable to succeed in reaching the strawberry-beds on account, as he said, of his belt. Trüchen, who had got quite sociable with the giant, said that it was not the belt so much as his corporation; and Porthos, in the state of the highest delight, embraced Trüchen, who gathered him a handful of strawberries, and made him eat them out of her hand. D'Artagnan, who arrived in the midst of these little innocent flirtations, scolded Porthos

for his indolence, and silently pitied Planchet. Porthos breakfasted with a very good appetite, and when he had finished he said, looking at Trüchen, "I could make myself very happy here." Trüchen smiled at his remark, and so did Planchet, but the latter not without some embarrassment.

D'Artagnan then addressed Porthos: "You must not let the delights of Capua make you forget the real object of our journey to Fontainebleau."

"My presentation to the king?"

"Certainly. I am going to take a turn in the town to get everything ready for that. Do not think of leaving the house, I beg."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Porthos.

Planchet looked at D'Artagnan nervously. "Will you be away long?" he inquired.

"No, my friend; and this very evening I will release you from two troublesome guests."

"Oh! Monsieur d'Artagnan! can you say——"

"No, no; you are an excellent-hearted fellow, but your house is very small. Such a house, with only a couple of acres of land, would be fit for a king and make him very happy, too. But you were not born a great lord."

"No more was Monsieur Porthos," murmured Planchet.

"But he has become so, my good fellow; his income has been a hundred thousand francs a year for the last twenty years, and for the last fifty years has been the owner of a couple of fists and a backbone which are not to be matched throughout the whole realm of France. Porthos is a man of the very greatest consequence compared to you, and—well, I need say no more, for I know you are an intelligent fellow."

"No, no, monsieur; explain what you mean."

"Look at your orchard, how stripped it is, how empty your larder, your bedstead broken, your cellar almost exhausted, look too—at Madame Trüchen——"

"Oh! my good gracious!" said Planchet.

"Madame Trüchen is an excellent person," continued D'Artagnan, "but keep her for yourself, do you understand?" and he slapped him on the shoulder.

Planchet at this moment perceived Porthos and Trüchen sitting close together in an arbor; Trüchen, with a grace of manner peculiarly Flemish, was making a pair of earrings for Porthos out of a double cherry, while Porthos was laughing as amorously as Samson did with Delilah. Plan-

chet pressed D'Artagnan's hand, and ran toward the arbor. We must do Porthos the justice to say that he did not move as they approached, and, very likely, he did not think he was doing any harm. Nor indeed did Trüchen move either, which rather put Planchet out; but he, too, had been so accustomed to see fashionable people in his shop that he found no difficulty in putting a good countenance on what was disagreeable to him. Planchet seized Porthos by the arm, and proposed to go and look at the horses, but Porthos pretended that he was tired. Planchet then suggested that the Baron du Vallon should taste some noyeau of his own manufacture, which was not to be equaled anywhere; an offer which the baron immediately accepted; and, in this way, Planchet managed to engage his enemy's attention during the whole of the day, by dint of sacrificing his cellar in preference to his *amour propre*. Two hours afterward D'Artagnan returned.

"Everything is arranged," he said. "I saw his majesty at the very moment he was setting off for the chase; the king expects us this evening."

"The king expects me!" cried Porthos, drawing himself up. It is a sad thing to have to confess, but a man's heart is like a restless billow; for, from that very moment, Porthos ceased to look at Mme. Trüchen in that touching manner which had so softened her heart. Planchet encouraged these ambitious leanings in the best way he could. He talked over, or rather, gave exaggerated accounts of all the splendors of the last reign, its battles, sieges, and grand court ceremonies. He spoke of the luxurious display which the English made; the prizes which the three brave companions had won, and how D'Artagnan, who at the beginning had been the humblest of the three, had finished by becoming the head. He fired Porthos with a generous feeling of enthusiasm by reminding him of his early youth now passed away; he boasted as much as he could of the moral life this great lord had led, and how religiously he respected the ties of friendship; he was eloquent, and skillful in his choice of subjects. He delighted Porthos, frightened Trüchen, and made D'Artagnan think. At six o'clock the musketeer ordered the horses to be brought around, and told Porthos to get ready. He thanked Planchet for his kind hospitality, whispered a few words about a post he succeeded in obtaining for him at court, which immediately raised Planchet in Trüchen's estimation, where the poor grocer—so good, so generous, so devoted—had become much

lowered ever since the appearance and comparison with him of the two great gentlemen. Such, however, is a woman's nature; they are anxious to possess what they have not got, and disdain it as soon as it is acquired. After having rendered this service to his friend Planchet, D'Artagnan said in a low tone of voice to Porthos: "That is a very beautiful ring you have on your finger."

"It is worth three hundred pistoles," said Porthos.

"Madame Trüchen will remember you better if you leave her that ring," replied D'Artagnan, a suggestion which Porthos seemed to hesitate to adopt.

"You think it is not beautiful enough, perhaps," said the musketeer. "I understand your feelings; a great lord as you are would not think of accepting the hospitality of an old servant without paying him most handsomely for it; but I am quite sure that Planchet is too good-hearted a fellow to remember that you have an income of a hundred thousand francs a year."

"I have more than half a mind," said Porthos, flattered by the remark, "to make Madame Trüchen a present of my little farm at Bracieux; it has twelve acres."

"It is too much, my good Porthos, too much just at present. Keep it for a future occasion." He then took the ring off Porthos' finger, and approaching Trüchen, said to her: "Madame, Monsieur le Baron hardly knows how to entreat you, out of your regard for him, to accept this little ring. Monsieur du Vallon is one of the most generous and discreet men of my acquaintance. He wished to offer you a farm that he has at Bracieux, but I dissuaded him from it."

"Oh!" said Trüchen, looking eagerly at the diamond.

"Monsieur le Baron!" exclaimed Planchet, quite overcome.

"My good friend," stammered out Porthos, delighted at having been so well represented by D'Artagnan. These several exclamations uttered at the same moment, made quite a pathetic winding up of a day which might have finished in a very ridiculous manner. But D'Artagnan was there, and, on every occasion, wherever D'Artagnan had exercised any control, matters had ended only just in the way he wished and desired. There were general embracings; Trüchen, whom the baron's munificence had restored to her proper position, very timidly, and blushing all the while, presented her forehead to the great lord with whom she had been on such very excellent terms the evening be-

fore. Planchet himself was overcome by a feeling of the deepest humility. Still, in the same generosity of disposition, Porthos would have emptied his pockets into the hands of the cook and of Celestin; but D'Artagnan stopped him.

"No," he said, "it is now my turn." And he gave one pistole to the woman and two to the man; and the benedictions which were showered down upon them would have rejoiced the heart of Harpagon himself, and have rendered even him prodigal of his money.

D'Artagnan made Planchet lead them to the château, and introduced Porthos into his own apartment, where he arrived safely without having been perceived by those he was afraid of meeting.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PRESENTATION OF PORTHOS AT COURT.

At seven o'clock the same evening the king gave an audience to an ambassador from the United Provinces in the grand reception-room. The audience lasted a quarter of an hour. His majesty afterward received those who had been recently presented, together with a few ladies, who paid their respects the first. In one corner of the salon, concealed behind a column, Porthos and D'Artagnan were conversing together, waiting until their turn arrived.

"Have you heard the news?" inquired the musketeer of his friend.

"No."

"Well, look then." Porthos raised himself on tiptoe, and saw M. Fouquet, in full court dress, leading Aramis toward the king.

"Aramis," said Porthos.

"Presented to the king by Monsieur Fouquet."

"Ah!" ejaculated Porthos.

"For having fortified Belle-Isle," continued D'Artagnan.

"And I?"

"You—oh! you, as I have already had the honor of telling you, are the good-natured, kind-hearted Porthos; and so they begged you to take care of St. Mandé a little."

"Ah!" repeated Porthos.

"But, very happily, I was there," said D'Artagnan, "and presently it will be my turn."

At this moment Fouquet addressed the king. "Sire," he said, "I have a favor to solicit of your majesty. Monsieur d'Herblay is not ambitious, but he knows he can be of some service to you. Your majesty needs a representative at Rome, who should be able to exercise a powerful influence there; may I request a cardinal's hat for Monsieur d'Herblay?"

The king started. "I do not often solicit anything of your majesty," said Fouquet.

"That is a reason, certainly," replied the king, who always expressed any hesitation he might have in that manner, and to which remark there was nothing to say in reply.

Fouquet and Aramis looked at each other. The king resumed: "Monsieur d'Herblay can serve us equally well in France; an archbishopric, for instance."

"Sire," objected Fouquet, with a grace of manner peculiarly his own, "your majesty overwhelms Monsieur d'Herblay; the archbishopric may, in your majesty's extreme kindness, be conferred in addition to the hat; the one does not exclude the other."

The king admired the readiness which he displayed, and smiled, saying: "D'Artagnan himself could not have answered better." He had no sooner pronounced the name than D'Artagnan appeared.

"Did your majesty call me?" he said.

Aramis and Fouquet drew back a step, as if they were about to retire.

"Will your majesty allow me," said D'Artagnan quickly, as he led forward Porthos, "to present to your majesty Monsieur le Baron du Vallon, one of the bravest gentlemen of France?"

As soon as Aramis saw Porthos he turned as pale as death, while Fouquet clinched his hands under his ruffles. D'Artagnan smiled at both of them, while Porthos bowed, visibly overcome before the royal presence.

"Porthos here?" murmured Fouquet in Aramis' ear.

"Hush! there is some treachery at work," said the latter.

"Sire," said D'Artagnan, "it is more than six years ago that I ought to have presented Monsieur du Vallon to your majesty; but certain men resemble stars, they move not unless their friends accompany them. The Pleiades are never disunited, and that is the reason I have selected, for the person of presenting him to you, the very moment when you see Monsieur d'Herblay by his side."

Aramis almost lost countenance. He looked at D'Artagnan with a proud, haughty air, as though willing to accept the defiance which the latter seemed to throw down.

"Ah! these gentlemen are good friends, then?" said the king.

"Excellent friends, sire; the one can answer for the other. Ask Monsieur de Vannes now in what manner Belle-Isle was fortified?" Fouquet moved back a step.

"Belle-Isle," said Aramis coldly, "has been fortified by that gentleman;" and he indicated Porthos with his hand, who bowed a second time. Louis could not withhold his admiration, though at the same time his suspicions were aroused.

"Yes," said D'Artagnan, "but ask Monsieur le Baron whose assistance he had in carrying the works out?"

"Aramis'," said Porthos frankly; and he pointed to the bishop.

"What the deuce does all this mean," thought the bishop, "and what sort of a termination are we to expect to this comedy?"

"What!" exclaimed the king, "is the cardinal's, I mean the bishop's, name Aramis?"

"A *nom de guerre*," said D'Artagnan.

"A name of friendship," said Aramis.

"A truce to modesty," exclaimed D'Artagnan; "beneath the priest's robe, sire, is concealed the most brilliant officer, a gentleman of the most unparalled intrepidity, and the wisest theologian in your kingdom."

Louis raised his head. "And an engineer, also, it appears," he said, admiring Aramis' calm, imperturbable self-possession.

"An engineer for a particular purpose, sire," said the latter.

"My companion in the musketeers, sire," said D'Artagnan, with great warmth of manner, "the man who has more than a hundred times aided your father's ministers by his advice—Monsieur d'Herblay, in a word, who, with Monsieur du Vallon, myself, and Monsieur le Comte de la Fere, who is known to your majesty, formed that quadrille which was a good deal talked about during the late king's reign, and during your majestys' minority."

"And who has fortified Belle-Isle?" the king repeated, in a significant tone.

Aramis advanced, and said: "In order to serve the son as I have served the father."

D'Artagnan looked at Aramis most narrowly while he uttered these words, which displayed so much true respect, so much warm devotion, such entire frankness and sincerity, that even he, D'Artagnan, the eternal doubter, he, the almost infallible in his judgment, was deceived by it. "A man who lies cannot speak in such a tone as that," he said.

Louis was overcome by it. "In that case," he said to Fouquet, who anxiously awaited the result of this proof, "the cardinal's hat is promised. Monsieur d'Herblay, I pledge you my honor that the first promotion shall be yours. Thank Monsieur Fouquet for it." Colbert overheard these words; they stung him to the quick, and he left the salon abruptly. "And, you, Monsieur du Vallon," said the king, "what have you to ask? I am pleased to have it in my power to acknowledge the services of those who were faithful to my father."

"Sire—" began Porthos, but he was unable to proceed with what he was going to say.

"Sire," exclaimed D'Artagnan, "this worthy gentleman is overpowered by your majesty's presence, he who has so valiantly sustained the looks and the fire of a thousand foes. But, knowing what his thoughts are, I—who am more accustomed to gaze upon the sun—can translate his thoughts; he needs nothing, his sole desire is to have the happiness of gazing upon your majesty for a quarter of an hour."

"You shall sup with me this evening," said the king, saluting Porthos with a gracious smile.

Porthos became crimson from delight and from pride. The king dismissed him, and D'Artagnan pushed him into the adjoining apartment, after he had embraced him warmly.

"Sit next to me at table," said Porthos in his ear.

"Yes, my friend."

"Aramis is annoyed with me, I think."

"Aramis has never liked you so much as he does now. Fancy, it was I who was the means of his getting the cardinal's hat."

"Of course," said Porthos. "By the bye, does the king like his guests to eat much at his table."

"It is a compliment to himself if you do," said D'Artagnan, "for he possesses a royal appetite."

CHAPTER IX.

EXPLANATIONS.

ARAMIS had cleverly managed to effect a diversion for the purpose of finding D'Artagan and Porthos. He came up to the latter behind one of the columns, and as he pressed his hand, said, "So you have escaped from my prison?"

"Do not scold him," said D'Artagnan; "it was I, dear Aramis, who set him free."

"Ah! my friend," replied Aramis, looking at Porthos, "could you not have waited with a little more patience?"

D'Artagnan came to the assistance of Porthos, who already began to breathe hard in perplexity.

"You see, you members of the Church are great politicians; we, mere soldiers, go at once to the point. The facts are these: I went to pay Baisemeaux a visit——"

Aramis pricked up his ears at this announcement.

"Stay!" said Porthos; "you make me remember that I have a letter from Baisemeaux for you, Aramis." And Porthos held out to the bishop the letter we have already seen. Aramis begged to be allowed to read it, and read it without D'Artagnan feeling in the slightest degree embarrassed by the circumstance that he was so well acquainted with the contents of it. Besides, Aramis' face was so impenetrable that D'Artagnan could not but admire him more than ever; after he had read it he put the letter into his pocket with the calmest possible air.

"You were saying, captain?" he observed.

"I was saying," continued the musketeer, "that I had gone to pay Baisemeaux a visit on his majesty's service."

"On his majesty's service?" said Aramis.

"Yes," said D'Artagnan, "and, naturally enough, we talked about you and our friends. I must say that Baisemeaux received me coldly; so I soon took my leave of him. As I was returning, a soldier accosted me, and said (no doubt he recognized me, notwithstanding I was in private clothes) 'Captain, will you be good enough to read the name written on this envelope?' and I read, 'To Monsieur du Vallon, at Monsieur Fouquet's, St. Mandé.' The deuce, said I to myself, Porthos has not returned, then, as I fancied, to Belle-Isle, or to Pierrefonds, but is at Monsieur Fouquet's house, at St. Mandé; and as Monsieur Fouquet is not at St. Mandé, Porthos must be quite alone, or, at all

events, with Aramis; I will go and see Porthos, and I accordingly went to see Porthos."

"Very good," said Aramis thoughtfully.

"You never told me that," said Porthos.

"I did not have the time, my friend."

"And you brought back Porthos with you to Fontainebleau?"

"Yes, to Planchet's house."

"Does Planchet live at Fontainebleau?" inquired Aramis.

"Yes, near the cemetery," said Porthos, thoughtlessly.

"What do you mean by 'near the cemetery'?" said Aramis suspiciously.

"Come," thought the musketeer, "since there is to be a squabble, let us take advantage of it."

"Yes, the cemetery," said Porthos. "Planchet is a very excellent fellow, who makes very excellent preserves; but his house has windows which look out upon the cemetery. And a very melancholy prospect it is. So this morning——"

"This morning?" said Aramis, more and more excited.

D'Artagnan turned his back to them, and walked to the window, where he began to play a march upon one of the panes of glass.

"Yes, this morning, we saw a man buried there."

"Ah! ah!"

"Very depressing, was it not? I should never be able to live in a house where burials can always be seen from it. D'Artagnan, on the contrary, seems to like it very much."

"So D'Artagnan saw it as well?"

"Not simply saw it, he literally never took his eyes off the whole time."

Aramis started, and turned to look at the musketeer, but the latter was engaged in earnest conversation with St. Aignan. Aramis continued to question Porthos, and when he had squeezed all the juice out of this enormous lemon, he threw the peel aside. He turned toward his friend D'Artagnan, and clapping him on the shoulder, when St. Aignan had left him, the king's supper having been announced, said, "D'Artagnan."

"Yes, my dear fellow," he replied.

"We do not sup with his majesty, I believe?"

"Yes, indeed, I do."

"Can you give me ten minutes' conversation?"

"Twenty, if you like. His majesty will take quite that time to get properly seated at table."

"Where shall we talk, then?"

"Here, upon these seats, if you like; the king has left, we can sit down, and the apartment is empty."

"Let us sit down, then."

They sat down, and Aramis took one of D'Artagnan's hands in his.

"Tell me candidly, my dear friend, whether you have not counseled Porthos to distrust me a little?"

"I admit I have, but not as you understand it. I saw that Porthos was bored to death, and I wished, by presenting him to the king, to do for him, and for you, what you would never do for yourselves."

"What is that?"

"Speak in your own praise."

"And you have done it most nobly, I thank you."

"And I brought the cardinal's hat a little nearer, just as it seemed to be retreating from you."

"Ah! I admit that," said Aramis, with a singular smile, "you are, indeed, not to be matched for making your friends' fortunes for them."

"You see, then, that I only acted with the view of making Porthos' fortune for him."

"I meant to have done that myself; but your arm reaches further than ours."

It was now D'Artagnan's turn to smile.

"Come," said Aramis, "we ought to deal truthfully with each other; do you still love me, D'Artagnan?"

"The same as I used to," replied D'Artagnan, without compromising himself too much by this reply.

"In that case, thanks; and now, for the most perfect frankness," said Aramis; "you came to Belle-Isle for the king."

"*Pardieu!*"

"You wished to deprive us of the pleasure of offering Belle-Isle completely fortified to the king?"

"But before I could deprive you of that pleasure, I ought to have been made acquainted with your intention of doing so."

"You came to Belle-Isle without knowing anything?"

"Of you? yes. How the devil could I imagine that Aramis had become so clever an engineer as to be able to fortify like Polybius or Archimedes?"

"True. And yet you divined me yonder?"

"Oh! yes."

"And Porthos, too?"

"I did not divine that Aramis was an engineer. I was only able to divine that Porthos might have become one.

There is a saying, one becomes an orator, one is born a poet; but it has never been said, one is born Porthos, and one becomes an engineer."

"Your wit is always amusing," said Aramis coldly. "Well, then, I will go on."

"Do so."

"When you found out our secret, you made all the haste you could to communicate it to the king."

"I certainly made as much haste as I could, since I saw that you were making still more. When a man weighing two hundred and fifty-eight pounds, as Porthos does, rides post; when a gouty prelate—I beg your pardon, but you told me you were so—when a prelate scours along the road; I naturally suppose that my two friends, who did not wish to be communicative with me, had certain matters of the highest importance to conceal from me, and so I made as much haste as my leanness and the absence of gout would allow."

"Did it not occur to you, my dear friend, that you might be rendering Porthos and myself a very sad service?"

"Yes, I thought it not unlikely; but you and Porthos made me play a very ridiculous part at Belle-Isle."

"I beg your pardon," said Aramis.

"Excuse me," said D'Artagnan.

"So that," pursued Aramis, "you know now everything?"

"No, indeed."

"You know I was obliged to inform Monsieur Fouquet of what had happened, in order that he might anticipate what you might have to tell the king?"

"That is rather obscure."

"Not at all; Monsieur Fouquet has his enemies—you will admit that, I suppose?"

"Certainly."

"And one in particular."

"A dangerous one?"

"A mortal enemy. Well, in order to counteract that man's influence, it was necessary that Monsieur Fouquet should give the king a proof of a great devotion to him, and of his readiness to make the greatest sacrifices. He surprised his majesty by offering him Belle-Isle. If you had been the first to reach Paris, the surprise would have been destroyed, it would have looked as if we had yielded to fear."

"I understand."

"That is the whole mystery," said Aramis, satisfied that he had quite convinced the musketeer.

"Only," said the latter, "it would have been more simple to have taken me aside, and said to me, 'My dear D'Artagnan, we are fortifying Belle-Isle, and intend to offer it to the king. Tell us frankly for whom you are acting. Are you a friend of Monsieur Colbert, or of Monsieur Fouquet?' Perhaps I should not have answered you, but you would have added—'Are you my friend?' I should have said 'Yes.'"

Aramis hung down his head.

"In this way," continued D'Artagnan, "you would have paralyzed my movements, and I should have gone to the king and said, 'Sire, Monsieur Fouquet is fortifying Belle-Isle, and exceedingly well, too; but here is a note, which the governor of Belle-Isle gave me for your majesty;' or, 'Monsieur Fouquet is about to wait upon your majesty to explain his intentions with regard to it.' I should not have been placed in an absurd position; you would have enjoyed the surprise you wished for, and we should not have had any occasion to look askance at each other when we met."

"While, on the contrary," replied Aramis, "you have acted altogether as one friendly to Monsieur Colbert. And you really are a friend of his, I suppose?"

"Certainly not, indeed!" exclaimed the captain. "Monsieur Colbert is a mean fellow, and I hate him as I used to hate Mazarin, but without fearing him."

"Well, then," said Aramis, "I love Monsieur Fouquet, and his interests are mine. You know my position. I have no property or means whatever. Monsieur Fouquet gave me several livings, a bishopric as well; Monsieur Fouquet has served and obliged me like the generous-hearted man he is, and I know the world sufficiently well to appreciate a kindness when I meet with it. Monsieur Fouquet has won my regard, and I have devoted myself to his service."

"You couldn't do better. You will find him a very good master."

Aramis bit his lips, and then said, "The best a man could possibly have." He then paused for a minute, D'Artagnan taking good care not to interrupt him.

"I suppose you know how Porthos got mixed up in all this?"

"No," said D'Artagnan; "I am curious, of course, but I never question a friend when he wishes to keep his real secret from me."

"Well, then, I will tell you."

"It is hardly worth the trouble, if the confidence is to bind me in any way."

"Oh! do not be afraid; there is no man whom I love better than Porthos, because he is so simple-minded and good. Porthos is so straightforward in everything. Since I have become a bishop, I have looked for those simple natures, which make me love truth and hate intrigue."

D'Artagnan simply stroked his mustache, but said nothing. "I saw Porthos and again cultivated his acquaintance; his own time hanging idly on his hands, his presence recalled my earlier and better days without engaging me in any present evil. I sent for Porthos to come to Vannes. Monsieur Fouquet, whose regard for me is very great, having learned that Porthos and I were attached to each other by old ties of friendship, promised him increase of rank at the earliest promotion, and that is the whole secret."

"I shall not abuse your confidence," said D'Artagnan.

"I am sure of that, my dear friend; no one has a finer sense of honor than yourself."

"I flatter myself you are right, Aramis."

"And now"—and here the prelate looked searchingly and scrutinizingly at his friend—"now let us talk of ourselves and for ourselves; will you become one of Monsieur Fouquet's friends? Do not interrupt me until you know what that means."

"Well, I am listening."

"Will you become a maréchal of France, peer, duke, and the possessor of a duchy, with a million of francs?"

"But, my friend," replied D'Artagnan, "what must one do to get all that?"

"Belong to Monsieur Fouquet."

"But I already belong to the king."

"Not exclusively, I suppose?"

"Oh! D'Artagnan cannot be divided."

"You have, I presume, ambitions, as noble hearts like yours have?"

"Yes, certainly I have."

"Well?"

"Well! I wish to be a maréchal; the king will make me maréchal, duke, peer; the king will make me all that."

Aramis fixed a searching look upon D'Artagnan.

"Is not the king master?" said D'Artagnan.

"No one disputes it; but Louis XIII. was master also."

"Oh! my dear friend, between Richelieu and Louis XIII. there was no D'Artagnan," said the musketeer very quietly.

"There are many stumbling-blocks round the king," said Aramis.

"Not for the king."

"Very likely not; still——"

"One moment, Aramis; I observe that every one thinks of himself, and never of his poor young prince; I will maintain myself in maintaining him."

"And if you meet with ingratitude?"

"The weak alone are afraid of that."

"You are quite certain of yourself?"

"I think so."

"Still the king may have no further need of you."

"On the contrary, I think his need of me will be greater than ever; and hearken, my dear fellow, if it became necessary to arrest a new Condé, who would do it? This—this alone in all France!" and D'Artagnan struck his sword.

"You are right," said Aramis, turning very pale; and then he rose and pressed D'Artagnan's hand.

"That is the last summons for supper," said the captain of the musketeers; "will you excuse me?"

Aramis threw his arm round the musketeer's neck, and said, "A friend like you is the brightest jewel in the royal crown." And they immediately separated.

"I was right," thought D'Artagnan; "there is something on foot."

"We must make haste with the explosion," said Aramis, "for D'Artagnan has discovered the plot."

CHAPTER X.

MADAME AND DE GUICHE.

It will not be forgotten that the Comte de Guiche had left the queen-mother's apartment on the day when Louis XIV. presented La Valliere with the beautiful bracelets he had won at the lottery. The comte walked to and fro for some time outside the palace, in the greatest distress, from a thousand suspicions and anxieties with which his mind was beset. Presently he stopped and waited on the terrace opposite the grove of trees, watching for madame's departure. More than half an hour passed away; and as he was at that moment quite alone, the comte could hardly have had any very diverting ideas at his command. He drew his tablets from his pocket, and, after hesitating over and over again, determined to write these words: "Madame, I implore you to grant me one moment's conversation. Do not

be alarmed at this request, which contains nothing in any way opposed to the profound respect with which I subscribe myself, etc., etc." He then signed and folded this singular supplication, when he suddenly observed several ladies leaving the château, and afterward several men also; in fact almost every person who had formed the queen's circle. He saw La Valliere herself, then Montalais talking with Malicorne; he saw the departure of the very last of the numerous guests who had a short time before thronged the queen-mother's cabinet.

Madame herself had not passed; she would be obliged, however, to cross the courtyard in order to enter her own apartments; and, from the terrace where he was standing, De Guiche could see all that was passing in the courtyard. At last he saw madame leave, attended by a couple of pages, who were carrying torches before her. She was walking very quickly; as soon as she reached the door she said:

"Let some one go and see after De Guiche, he has to render me an account of a mission he has to discharge for me; if he should be disengaged, request him to be good enough to come to my apartment."

De Guiche remained silent and concealed in the shade; but, as soon as madame had withdrawn, he darted from the terrace down the steps, and assumed a most indifferent air, so that the pages who were hurrying toward his rooms might meet him.

"Ah! it is madame, then, who is seeking me!" he said to himself, quite overcome; and he crushed in his hand the letter which had now become useless.

"Monsieur le Comte," said one of the pages, approaching him, "we are indeed most fortunate in meeting you."

"Why so, messieurs?"

"A command from madame."

"From madame!" said De Guiche, looking surprised.

"Yes, Monsieur le Comte, her royal highness has been asking for you; she expects to hear, she told us, the result of a commission you had to execute for her. Are you at liberty?"

"I am quite at her royal highness' orders."

"Will you have the goodness to follow us, then?"

When De Guiche ascended to the princess' apartments, he found her pale and agitated. Montalais was standing at the door, apparently in some degree uneasy about what was passing in her mistress' mind. De Guiche appeared.

"Ah! is that you, Monsieur de Guiche?" said madame;

"come in, I beg. Mademoiselle de Montalais, I do not require your attendance any longer."

Montalais, more puzzled than ever, courtesied and withdrew, and De Guiche and the princess were left alone. The comte had every advantage in his favor; it was madame who had summoned him to a rendezvous. But how was it possible for the comte to make use of this advantage? Madame was so whimsical, and her disposition was so changeable. She soon allowed this to be perceived, for, suddenly opening the conversation, she said: "Well! have you nothing to say to me?"

He imagined she must have guessed his thoughts; he fancied (for those who are in love are so constituted, they are as credulous and blind as poets or prophets), he fancied she knew how ardent was his desire to see her, and also the subject of it.

"Yes, madame," he said, "and I think it very singular."

'The affair of the bracelets," she exclaimed eagerly, "you mean that, I suppose?"

"Yes, madame."

"And you think the king is in love; do you not?"

De Guiche looked at her for some time; her eyes sank under his gaze, which seemed to read her very heart.

"I think," he said, "that the king may possibly have had the idea of annoying some one here; were it not for that, the king would not show himself so earnest in his attentions as he is; he would not run the risk of compromising, from mere thoughtlessness of disposition, a young girl against whom no one has been hitherto able to say a word."

"Indeed! the bold, shameless girl," said the princess haughtily.

"I can positively assure your royal highness," said De Guiche, with a firmness marked by great respect, "that Mademoiselle de la Valliere is beloved by a man who merits every respect, for he is a brave and honorable gentleman."

"Bragelonne, perhaps?"

"My friend; yes, madame."

"Well, and although he is your friend, what does that matter to the king?"

"The king knows that Bragelonne is affianced to Mademoiselle de la Valliere; and as Raoul has served the king most valiantly, the king will not inflict an irreparable injury upon him."

Madame began to laugh in a manner that produced a mournful impression upon De Guiche.

"I repeat, madame, I do not believe the king is in love with Mademoiselle de la Valliere; and the proof that I do not believe it is, that I was about to ask you whose *amour propre* it is likely the king is, in this circumstance, desirous of wounding? You, who are well acquainted with the whole court, can perhaps assist me in ascertaining that; and assuredly, with greater reason too, since it is everywhere said that your royal highness is on very intimate terms with the king."

Madame bit her lips, and, unable to assign any good and sufficient reasons, changed the conversation. "Prove to me," she said, fixing on him one of those looks in which the whole soul seems to pass into the eyes; "prove to me, I say, that you intended to interrogate me at the very moment I sent for you."

De Guiche gravely drew from his tablets what he had written, and showed it to her.

"Sympathy," she said.

"Yes," said the comte, with an indescribable tenderness of tone, "sympathy. I have explained to you how and why I sought you; you, however, have yet to tell me, madame, why you sent for me."

"True," replied the princess. She hesitated, and then suddenly exclaimed, "Those bracelets will drive me mad."

"You expected the king would offer them to you," replied De Guiche.

"Why not?"

"But before you, madame, before you, his sister-in-law, was there not the queen herself to whom the king should have offered them?"

"Before La Valliere," cried the princess, wounded to the quick, "could he not have presented them to me? Was there not the whole court, indeed, to choose from?"

"I assure you, madame," said the comte respectfully, "that if any one heard you speak in this manner, if any one were to see how red your eyes are, and, Heaven forgive me, to see, too, that tear trembling on your eyelids, it would be said that your royal highness was jealous."

"Jealous!" said the princess haughtily, "jealous of La Valliere!"

She expected to see De Guiche yield beneath her haughty gesture and her proud tone; but he simply and boldly replied, "Jealous of La Valliere; yes, madame."

"Am I to suppose, monsieur," she stammered out, "that your object is to insult me?"

"It is not possible, madame," replied the comte, slightly agitated, but resolved to master that fiery nature.

"Leave the room," said the princess, thoroughly exasperated; De Guiche's coolness and silent respect having made her completely lose her temper.

De Guiche fell back a step, bowed slowly but with great respect, drew himself up, looking as white as his lace cuffs, and, in a voice slightly trembling, said, "It was hardly worth while to have hurried here to be subjected to this unmerited disgrace." And he turned away with hasty steps.

He had scarcely gone half a dozen paces when madame darted, like a tigress, after him, seized him by the cuff, and, making him turn round again, said, trembling with passion as she did so, "The respect that you pretend to have is more insulting than insult itself. Insult me, if you please, but at least speak."

"And do you, madame," said the comte gently, as he drew his sword, "thrust this sword into my heart rather than kill me by slow degrees."

At the look he fixed upon her—a look full of love, resolution, and despair even, she knew how readily the comte, so outwardly calm in appearance, would pass his sword through his own breast if she added another word. She tore the blade from his hands, and, pressing his arm with a feverish impatience, which might pass for tenderness, said, "Do not be too hard with me, comte. You see how I am suffering, and you have no pity for me."

Tears, which were the last crisis of the attack, stifled her voice. As soon as De Guiche saw her weep he took her in his arms and carried her to an armchair; in another moment she would have been suffocated from suppressed passion.

"Oh, why," he murmured, as he knelt by her side, "why do you conceal your troubles from me? Do you love any one—tell me? It would kill me, I know, but not until I should have comforted, consoled, and served you even."

"And do you love me to that extent?" she replied, completely conquered.

"I do indeed love you to that extent, madame."

She placed both her hands in his. "My heart is indeed another's," she murmured, in so low a tone that her voice could hardly be heard; but he heard it, and said:

"Is it the king you love?"

She gently shook her head, and her smile was like a clear

bright streak in the clouds, through which, after the tempest had passed away, one almost fancies paradise is opening. "But," she added, "there are other passions stirring in a high-born heart. Love is poetry; but the life of the heart is pride. Comte, I was born upon a throne; I am proud and jealous of my rank. Why does the king gather such unworthy objects round him?"

"Once more I repeat," said the comte, "you are acting unjustly toward that poor girl, who will one day be my friend's wife."

"Are you simple enough to believe that, comte?"

"If I did not believe it," he said, turning very pale, "Bragelonne should be informed of it to-morrow; indeed he should, if I thought that poor La Valliere had forgotten the vows she had exchanged with Raoul. But no; it would be cowardly to betray any woman's secret; it would be criminal to disturb a friend's peace of mind."

"You think, then," said the princess, with a wild burst of laughter, "that ignorance is happiness?"

"I believe it," he replied.

"Prove it to me, then," she said hurriedly.

"It is easily done, madame. It is reported through the whole court that the king loves you, and that you return his affection."

"Well?" she said, breathing with difficulty.

"Well; admit for a moment that Raoul, my friend, had come and said to me, 'Yes, the king loves madame, and has made an impression upon her heart,' I should possibly have slain Raoul."

"It would have been necessary," said the princess, with the obstinacy of a woman who feels herself not easily overcome, "for Monsieur de Bragelonne to have had proofs before he could venture to speak to you in that manner."

"Such, however, is the case," replied De Guiche, with a deep sigh, "that not having been warned, I have never examined the matter seriously; and I now find that my ignorance has saved my life."

"So, then, you would drive your selfishness and coldness to that extent," said madame, "that you would let this unhappy young man continue to love La Valliere?"

"I would, until La Valliere's guilt were revealed."

"But the bracelets?"

"Well, madame, since you yourself expected to receive them from the king, what could I possibly have said?"

The argument was a telling one, and the princess was

overwhelmed by it, and from that moment her defeat was assured. But as her heart and her mind were instinct with noble and generous feelings, she understood De Guiche's extreme delicacy. She saw that in his heart he really suspected that the king was in love with La Valliere, and that he did not wish to resort to the common expedient of ruining a rival in the mind of a woman, by giving the latter the assurance and certainty that this rival's affections were transferred to another woman. She guessed that his suspicions of La Valliere were aroused, and that, in order to leave himself time for his conviction to undergo a change, so as not to ruin her utterly, he was determined to pursue a certain straightforward line of conduct. She could read so much real greatness of character, and such true generosity of disposition in her lover, that her heart seemed to warm with affection toward him, whose passion for her was so pure and delicate in its nature. Despite his fear of incurring her displeasure, De Guiche, by retaining his position as a man of proud independence of feeling and of deep devotion, became almost a hero in her estimation, and reduced her to the state of a jealous and little-minded woman. She loved him for it so tenderly that she could not refuse to give him a proof of her affection.

"See how many words we have wasted," she said, taking his hand, "suspicions, anxieties, mistrust, sufferings—I think we have mentioned all those words."

"Alas! madame, yes."

"Efface them from your heart as I drive them from mine. Whether La Valliere does or does not love the king, and whether the king does or does not love La Valliere—from this moment you and I will draw a distinction in the two characters I have to perform. You open your eyes so wide that I am sure you do not understand me."

"You are so impetuous, madame, that I always tremble at the fear of displeasing you."

"And see how he trembles now, poor fellow," she said, with the most charming playfulness of manner. "Yes, monsieur, I have two characters to perform. I am the sister of the king, the sister-in-law of the king's wife. In this character ought I not to take an interest in these domestic intrigues? Come, tell me what you think?"

"As little as possible, madame."

"Agreed, monsieur; but it is a question of dignity; and then, you know, I am the wife of the king's brother." De Guiche sighed. "A circumstance," she added, with an

expression of great tenderness, "which will remind you that I am always to be treated with the profoundest respect."

De Guiche fell at her feet, which he kissed, with the religious fervor of a worshiper. "And I begin to think that, really and truly, I have another character to perform. I was almost forgetting it."

"Name it, oh! name it," said De Guiche.

"I am a woman," she said, in a voice lower than ever, "and I love another." He rose; she opened her arms, and their lips were pressed together. A footstep was heard behind the tapestry, and Mlle. de Montalais appeared.

"What do you want?" said madame.

"Monsieur de Guiche is wanted," said Montalais, who was just in time to see the agitation of the actors of these four characters; for De Guiche had constantly carried out his part with the greatest heroism.

CHAPTER XI.

MONTALAIS AND MALICORNE.

Montalais was right. M. de Guiche, summoned in every direction, was very much exposed, even from the multiplication of matters, to the risk of not answering in any one direction. It so happened that, considering the awkwardness of the interruption, madame, notwithstanding her wounded pride, and her secret anger, could not, for the moment at least, reproach Montalais for having violated, in so bold a manner, the semi-royal order with which she had been dismissed on De Guiche's entrance. De Guiche, also, lost his presence of mind, or it would be better to say that he had already lost it, before Montalais' arrival, for, scarcely had he heard the young girl's voice than, without taking leave of madame, as the most ordinary politeness required, even between persons equal in rank and station, he fled from her presence, his heart tumultuously throbbing, and his brain on fire, leaving the princess with one hand raised, as though about to bid him adieu. Montalais was at no loss, therefore, to perceive the agitation of the two lovers—the one who fled was agitated, and the one who remained was equally so.

"So, so," murmured the young girl, as she glanced inquisitively round her, "this time, at least, I think I know as much as the most curious woman could possibly wish to

know." Madame felt so embarrassed by this inquisitorial look that, as if she heard Montalais' muttered side remark, she did not speak a word to her maid of honor, but, casting down her eyes, retired at once to her bedroom. Montalais, observing this, stood listening for a moment, and then heard madame lock and bolt her door. By this she knew that the rest of the evening was at her own disposal; and making, behind the door which had just been closed, a gesture which indicated but little real respect for the princess, she went down the staircase in search of Malicorne, who was very busily engaged at that moment in watching a courier, who, covered with dust, had just left the Comte de Guiche's apartments. Montalais knew that Malicorne was engaged in a matter of some importance; she therefore allowed him to look and stretch out his neck as much as he pleased; and it was only when Malicorne had resumed his natural position that she touched him on the shoulder.

"Well," said Montalais, "what is the latest intelligence you have?"

"Monsieur de Guiche is in love with madame."

"Fine news, truly! I know something more recent than that."

"Well, what do you know?"

"That madame is in love with Monsieur de Guiche."

"The one is the consequence of the other."

"Not always, my good monsieur."

"Is that remark intended for me?"

"Present company are always excepted."

"Thank you," said Malicorne. "Well, and in the other direction, what is there fresh?"

"The king wished, this evening, after the lottery to see Mademoiselle de la Valliere."

"Well, and he has seen her?"

"No, indeed."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The door was shut and locked."

"So that——"

"So that the king was obliged to go back again, looking very sheepish, like a thief who has forgotten his implements."

"Good."

"And in the third direction?" inquired Montalais.

"The courier who has just arrived for De Guiche came from Monsieur de Bragelonne."

"Excellent," said Montalais, clapping her hands together.

"Why so?"

"Because we have work to do. If we get weary now something unfortunate will be sure to happen."

"We must divide the work, then," said Malicorne, "in order to avoid confusion."

"Nothing easier," replied Montalais. "Three intrigues, carefully nursed, and carefully encouraged, will produce, one with another, and, taking a low average, three love letters a day."

"Oh!" exclaimed Malicorne, shrugging his shoulders, "you cannot mean what you say, darling; three letters a day, that may do for sentimental common people! A musketeer on duty, a young girl in a convent, may exchange letters with their lovers once a day, perhaps, from the top of a ladder, or through a hole in the wall. A letter contains all the poetry their poor little hearts have to boast of. But the cases we have in hand require to be dealt with very differently."

"Well, finish," said Montalais, out of patience with him. "Some one may come."

"Finish! Why, I am only at the beginning. I have still three points as yet untouched."

"Upon my word, he will be the death of me, with his Flemish indifference," exclaimed Montalais.

"And you will drive me mad with your Italian vivacity. I was going to say that our lovers here will be writing volumes to each other. But what are you driving at?"

"At this: Not one of our lady correspondents will be able to keep the letters they may receive."

"Very likely not."

"Monsieur de Guiche will not be able to keep his either."

"That is probable."

"Very well, then; I will take care of all that."

"That is the very thing which is impossible," said Malicorne.

"Why so?"

"Because you are not your own mistress; your room is as much La Valliere's as yours; and there are certain persons who will think nothing of visiting and searching a maid of honor's room; so that I am terribly afraid of the queen, who is as jealous as a Spaniard; of the queen-mother, who is as jealous as a couple of Spaniards; and, last of all, of madame herself, who has jealousy enough for ten Spaniards."

"You forget some one else."

"Who?"

"Monsieur."

"I was only speaking of the women. Let us add them up, then: we will call Monsieur, No. 1."

"De Guiche?"

"No. 2."

"The Vicomte de Bragelonne?"

"No. 3."

"And the king, the king?"

"No. 4. Of course the king, who not only will be more jealous, but still more powerful than all the rest put together. Ah, my dear!"

"Well?"

"Into what a wasp's nest you have thrust yourself!"

"And as yet not quite far enough, if you will follow me into it."

"Most certainly I will follow you where you like. Yet——"

"Well, yet——"

"While we have time enough left, I think it will be more prudent to turn back."

"But I, on the contrary, think the most prudent course to take is to put ourselves at once at the head of all these intrigues."

"You will never be able to do it."

"With you, I would carry on ten of them. I am in my element, you must know. I was born to live at the court, as the salamander is made to live in the fire."

"Your comparision does not reassure me in the slightest degree in the world, my dear Montalais. I have heard it said, and by very learned men, too, that, in the first place, there are no salamanders at all, and that if there had been any, they would have been perfectly baked or roasted on leaving the fire."

"Your learned men may be very wise as far as salamanders are concerned, but your learned men would never tell you what I can tell you, namely, that Aure de Montalais is destined, before a month is over, to become the first diplomatic genius in the court of France."

"Be it so, but on condition that I shall be the second."

"Agreed; an offensive and defensive alliance, of course."

"Only be very careful of any letters."

"I will hand them to you as I receive them."

"What shall we tell the king about madame?"

"That madame is still in love with his majesty."

"What shall we tell madame about the king?"

"That she would be exceedingly wrong not to humor him."

"What shall we tell La Valliere about madame?"

"Whatever we choose, for La Valliere is in our power."

"How so?"

"In two ways."

"What do you mean?"

"In the first place, through the Vicomte de Bragelonne."

"Explain yourself."

"You do not forget, I hope, that Monsieur de Bragelonne has written many letters to Mademoiselle de la Valliere?"

"I forget nothing."

"Well, then, it was I who received, and I who kept those letters."

"And, consequently, it is you who have them still?"

"Yes."

"Where? here?"

"Oh, no; I have them safe at Blois, in the little room you know well enough."

"That dear little room, that darling little room, the antechamber of the palace I intend you to live in one of these days. But, I beg your pardon, you said that all those letters are in that little room?"

"Yes."

"Did you not put them in a box?"

"Of course; in the same box where I put all the letters I received from you, and where I put mine also when your business or your amusements prevented you from coming to our rendezvous."

"Ah! very good," said Malicorne.

"Why are you so satisfied?"

"Because I see there is a possibility of not having to run to Blois after the letters, for I have them here."

"You have brought the box away?"

"It was very dear to me, because it belonged to you."

"Be sure and take care of it, for it contains original documents which will be of very great value by and by."

"I am perfectly well aware of that indeed, and that is the very reason why I laugh as I do, and with all my heart, too."

"And now, one last word."

"Why the last?"

"Do we need any one to assist us?"

"No one at all."

"Valets or maid-servants?"

"Bad—detestable. You will give the letters—you will

receive them. Oh! we must have no pride in this affair, otherwise Monsieur Malicorne and Mademoiselle Aure, not transacting their own affairs themselves, will have to make up their minds to see them done by others."

"You are quite right. But what is going on yonder in Monsieur de Guiche's room?"

"Nothing; he is only opening his window."

"Let us be gone." And they both immediately disappeared, all the terms of the compact having been agreed upon.

The window which had just been opened was, in fact, that of the Comte de Guiche. It was not alone with the hope of catching a glimpse of madame through her curtains that he seated himself by the open window, for his preoccupation of mind had at that time a different origin. He had just received, as we have already stated, the courier who had been dispatched to him by Bragelonne, the latter having written to De Guiche a letter which had made the deepest impression upon him, and which he had read over and over again.

"Strange, strange!" he murmured. "How powerful are the means by which destiny hurries men on toward their fate!" Leaving the window in order to approach nearer to the light, he again read over the letter he had just received:

"Calais.

"My Dear Count: I found Monsieur de Wardes at Calais; he has been seriously wounded in an affair with the Duke of Buckingham. De Wardes is, as you know, unquestionably brave, but full of malevolent and wicked feelings. He conversed with me about yourself, for whom, he says, he has a warm regard, also about madame, whom he considers a beautiful and amiable woman. He has guessed your affection for a certain person. He also talked to me about the person for whom I have so ardent a regard, and showed the greatest interest on my behalf in expressing a deep pity for me, accompanied, however, by dark hints which alarmed me at first, but which I at last looked upon as the result of his usual love of mystery. These are the facts: he had received news of the court; you will understand, however, that it was only through Monsieur de Lorraine. The report is, so says the news, that a change has taken place in the king's affections. You know whom that concerns. Afterward, the news continues, people are talking about one of the maids of honor, respecting whom various slanderous reports are being circulated. These

vague phrases have not allowed me to sleep. I have been deploring, ever since yesterday, that my diffidence and vacillation of purpose should, notwithstanding a certain obstinacy of character I may possess, have left me unable to reply to these insinuations. In a word, therefore, Monsieur de Wardes was setting off for Paris, and I did not delay his departure with explanations; for it seemed rather hard, I confess, to cross-examine a man whose wounds are hardly yet closed. In short, he traveled by short stages, as he was anxious to leave, he said, in order to be present at a curious spectacle which the court cannot fail to offer within a very short time. He added a few congratulatory words, accompanied by certain sympathizing expressions. I could not understand the one any more than the other. I was bewildered by my own thoughts, and then tormented by a mistrust of this man—a mistrust which, you know better than any one else, I have never been able to overcome. As soon as he left my perception seemed to become clearer. It is hardly possible that a man of De Wardes' character should not have communicated something of his own malicious nature to the statements he made to me. It is not unlikely, therefore, that in the mysterious hints which De Wardes threw out in my presence, there may not be a mysterious signification, which I might have some difficulty in applying either to myself or to some one with whom you are acquainted. Being compelled to leave as soon as possible, in obedience to the king's commands, the idea did not occur to me of running after De Wardes in order to ask him to explain his reserve, but I have dispatched a courier to you with this letter, which will explain in detail all my various doubts. I regard you as myself; it is you who have thought, and it will be for you to act. Monsieur de Wardes will arrive very shortly; endeavor to learn what he meant, if you do not already know it. Monsieur de Wardes, moreover, pretended that the Duke of Buckingham left Paris on the very best of terms with madame. This was an affair which would have unhesitatingly made me draw my sword, had I not felt that I was under the necessity of dispatching the king's mission before undertaking any quarrel. Burn this letter, which Olivian will hand you. Whatever Olivian says you may confidently rely upon. Will you have the goodness, my dear comte, to recall me to the remembrance of Mademoiselle de la Valliere, whose hands I kiss with the greatest respect.

"Your devoted,

"De Bragelonne.

"P.S.—If anything serious should happen—we should be prepared for everything—dispatch a courier to me with this one single word, 'Come,' and I shall be in Paris within thirty-six hours after I shall have received your letter."

De Guiche sighed, folded the letter up a third time, and, instead of burning it, as Raoul had recommended him to do, placed it in his pocket. He felt that he needed to read it over and over again.

"How much distress of mind, and yet how great a confidence, he shows!" murmured the comte; "he has poured out his whole soul in that letter. He says nothing of the Comte de la Fere, and speaks of his respect for Louise. He cautions me on my account, and entreats me on his own. Ah!" continued De Guiche, with a threatening gesture, "you interfere in my affairs, Monsieur de Wardes, do you? Very well, then; I shall now occupy myself with yours. And for you, poor Raoul, you who intrust your heart to my keeping, be assured I will watch over it."

With this promise, De Guiche begged Malicorne to come immediately to his apartments, if it were possible. Malicorne acknowledged the invitation with an activity which was the first result of his conversation with Montalais. And while De Guiche, who thought that this motive was undiscovered, cross-examined Malicorne, the latter, who appeared to be working in the dark, soon guessed his questioner's motives. The consequence was that, after a quarter of an hour's conversation, during which De Guiche thought he had ascertained the whole truth with regard to La Valliere and the king, he had learned absolutely nothing more than his own eyes had already acquainted him with, while Malicorne learned, or guessed, that Raoul, who was absent, was fast becoming suspicious, and that De Guiche intended to watch over the treasure of the Hesperides. Malicorne accepted the office of dragon. De Guiche fancied he had done everything for his friend, and soon began to think of nothing but his own personal affairs. The next evening De Wardes' return and his first appearance at the king's reception were announced. When the visit had been paid the convalescent waited on Monsieur; De Guiche taking care, however, to be at Monsieur's apartments before the visit took place.

CHAPTER XII.

HOW DE WARDES WAS RECEIVED AT COURT.

Monsieur had received De Wardes with that marked favor which all light and frivolous minds bestow on every novelty that may come in their way. De Wardes, who had been absent for a month, was like fresh fruit to him. To treat him with marked kindness was an infidelity to his old friends, and there is always something fascinating in that; moreover, it was a sort of reparation to De Wardes himself. Nothing, consequently, could exceed the favorable notice Monsieur took of him. The Chevalier de Lorraine, who feared this rival not a little, but who respected a character and disposition which were precisely parallel to his own in every particular, with the addition of a courage he did not himself possess, received De Wardes with a greater display of regard and affection than even Monsieur had done. De Guiche, as we have said, was there also, but kept a little in the background, waiting very patiently until all these embraces were over. De Wardes, while talking to the others, and even to Monsieur himself, had not for a moment lost sight of De Guiche, who, he instinctively felt, was there on his account. As soon as he had finished with the others, he went up to De Guiche. They both exchanged the most courteous compliments, after which De Wardes returned to Monsieur and the other gentlemen. In the midst of these congratulations madame was announced. She had been informed of De Wardes' arrival, and knowing all the details of his voyage and of his duel, she was not sorry to be present at the remarks she knew would be made, without delay, by one who, she felt assured, was her personal enemy. Two or three of her ladies accompanied her. De Wardes saluted madame in the most graceful and respectful manner, and, as a commencement of hostilities, announced, in the first place, that he could furnish the Duke of Buckingham's friends with the latest news about him. This was a direct answer to the coldness with which madame had received him. The attack was a vigorous one, and madame felt the blow, but without appearing to have even noticed it. He rapidly cast a glance at Monsieur and at De Guiche; the former had colored, and the latter had turned very pale. Madame alone preserved an unmoved countenance; but, as she knew how many unpleasant thoughts and feelings her enemy could awaken in the two persons who were listening

to him, she smilingly bent forward toward the traveler, as if to listen to the news he had brought; but he was speaking of other matters. Madame was brave, even to imprudence; if she were to retreat, it would be inviting an attack; so, after the first disagreeable impression had passed away, she returned to the charge.

"Have you suffered much from your wounds, Monsieur de Wardes?" she inquired, "for we have been told that you had the misfortune to get wounded."

It was now De Wardes' turn to wince; he bit his lip, and replied, "No, madame, hardly at all."

"Indeed! and yet in this terribly hot weather——"

"The sea-breezes are fresh and cool, madame, and then I had one consolation."

"Indeed! What was it?"

"The knowledge that my adversary's sufferings were still greater than my own."

"Ah! you mean he was more seriously wounded than you were; I was not aware of that," said the princess, with utter indifference.

"Oh, madame, you are mistaken, or rather you pretend to misunderstand my remark. I did not say that he was suffering more in body than myself; but his heart was seriously affected."

De Guiche comprehended in what direction the struggle was approaching; he ventured to make a sign to madame, as if entreating her to retire from the contest. But she, without acknowledging De Guiche's gesture, without pretending to have noticed it even, and still smiling, continued:

"Is it possible," she said, "that the Duke of Buckingham's heart was touched? I had no idea, until now, that a heart-wound could be cured."

"Alas! madame," replied De Wardes politely, "every woman believes that; and it is such a belief which gives them over us that superiority which confidence imposes."

"You misunderstand altogether, dearest," said the prince impatiently; "Monsieur de Wardes means that the Duke of Buckingham's heart had been touched, not by a sword, but by something else."

"Ah! very good, very good!" exclaimed madame. "It is a jest of Monsieur de Wardes'; very good; but I should like to know if the Duke of Buckingham would appreciate the jest. It is, indeed, a very great pity he is not here, Monsieur de Wardes."

The young man's eyes seemed to flash fire. "Oh!" he

said, as he clinched his teeth, "there is nothing I should like better."

De Guiche did not move. Madame seemed to expect that he would come to her assistance. Monsieur hesitated. The Chevalier de Lorraine advanced and continued the conversation.

"Madame," he said, "De Wardes knows perfectly well that for a Buckingham's heart to be touched is nothing new, and what he has said has already taken place."

"Instead of an ally, I have two enemies," murmured madame; "two determined enemies, and in league with each other." And she changed the conversation. To change the conversation is, as every one knows, a right possessed by princes which etiquette requires all to respect. The remainder of the conversation was moderate enough in its tone; the principal actors had finished their parts. Madame withdrew early, and Monsieur, who wished to question her on several matters, offered her his hand on leaving. The chevalier was seriously afraid that a good understanding might be established between the husband and wife if he were to leave them quietly together. He therefore made his way to Monsieur's apartments, in order to surprise him on his return, and to destroy with a few words all the good impressions that madame might have been able to sow in his heart. De Guiche advanced toward De Wardes, who was surrounded by a large number of persons, and thereby indicated his wish to converse with him; De Wardes, at the same time, showing by his looks and by a movement of his head that he perfectly understood him. There was nothing in these signs to enable strangers to suppose they were otherwise than upon the most friendly footing. De Guiche could therefore turn away from him, and wait until he was at liberty. He had not long to wait; for De Wardes, freed from his questioners, approached De Guiche, and both of them, after a fresh salutation, began to walk side by side together.

"You have made a good impression since your return, my dear De Wardes," said the comte.

"Excellent, as you see."

"And your spirits are just as lively as ever?"

"More than ever."

"And a very great happiness, too."

"Why not? Everything is so ridiculous in this world, everything so absurd around us."

"You are right."

"You are of my opinion, then?"

"I should think so. And what news do you bring us from yonder?"

"I? none at all. I have come to look for news here."

"But, tell me, you surely must have seen some people at Boulogne, one of our friends, for instance; it is no great time ago."

"Some people—one of our friends——"

"Your memory is short."

"Ah! true; Bragelonne, you mean."

"Exactly so."

"Who was on his way to fulfill a mission, with which he was intrusted to King Charles II."

"Precisely. Well, then, did he not tell you, or did not you tell him——"

"I do not precisely know what I told him, I must confess; but I do know what I did not tell him." De Wardes was *finesse* itself. He perfectly well knew from De Guiche's tone and manner, which was cold and dignified, that the conversation was about assuming a disagreeable turn. He resolved to let it take what course it pleased, and to keep strictly on his guard.

"May I ask what it was you did not tell him?" inquired De Guiche.

"That about La Valliere."

"La Valliere— What is it; and what was that strange circumstance you seem to have known out yonder, which Bragelonne, who was here on the spot, was not acquainted with?"

"Do you really ask me that in a serious manner?"

"Nothing can be more so."

"What! you, a member of the court, living in madame's household, a friend of Monsieur's, a guest at their table, the favorite of our lovely princess?"

De Guiche colored violently from anger. "What princess are you alluding to?" he said.

"I am only acquainted with one, my dear fellow. I am speaking of madame herself. Are you devoted to another princess, then? Come, tell me."

De Guiche was on the point of launching out, but he saw the drift of the remark. A quarrel was imminent between the two young men. De Wardes wished the quarrel to be only in madame's name, while De Guiche would not accept it except on La Valliere's account. From this moment, it became a series of feigned attacks, which would have con-

tinued until one of the two had been touched home. De Guiche, therefore, resumed all the self-possession he could command.

"There is not the slightest question in the world of madame in this matter, my dear De Wardes," said De Guiche, "but simply of what you were talking about just now."

"What was I saying?"

"That you had concealed certain things from Bragelonne."

"Certain things which you know as well as I do," replied De Wardes.

"No, upon my honor."

"Nonsense."

"If you tell me what it is, I shall know, but not otherwise, I swear."

"What! I, who have just arrived from a distance of sixty leagues, and you who have not stirred from this place, who have witnessed with your own eyes that which rumor informed me at Calais! Do you now tell me seriously that you do not know what it is about? Oh! comte, this is hardly charitable of you."

"As you like it, De Wardes; but I again repeat, I know nothing."

"You are very discreet; well, perhaps it is very prudent of you."

"And so you will not tell me anything, will not tell me any more than you told Bragelonne?"

"You are pretending to be deaf, I see. I am convinced that madame could not possibly have more command over herself than you have over yourself."

"Double hypocrite," murmured De Guiche to himself, "you are again returning to the old subject."

"Very well, then," continued De Wardes, "since we find it so difficult to understand each other about La Valliere and Bragelonne, let us speak about your own affairs."

"Nay," said De Guiche, "I have no affairs of my own to talk about. You have not said anything about me, I suppose, to Bragelonne which you cannot repeat to myself?"

"No; but understand me, De Guiche, that however much I may be ignorant of certain matters, I am quite as conversant with others. If, for instance, we were conversing about certain intimacies of the Duke of Buckingham at Paris, as I did during my journey with the duke, I could tell you a great many interesting circumstances. Would you like me to mention them?"

De Guiche passed his hand across his forehead, which was

covered with perspiration. "No, no," he said, "a hundred times no! I have no curiosity for matters which do not concern me. The Duke of Buckingham is for me nothing more than a simple acquaintance, while Raoul is an intimate friend. I have not the slightest curiosity to learn what happened to the duke, while I have, on the contrary, the greatest interest to learn what happened to Raoul."

"At Paris?"

"Yes, at Paris, or at Boulogne. You understand, I am on the spot; if anything should happen, I am here to meet it; while Raoul is absent, and has only myself to represent him; so Raoul's affairs before my own."

"But Raoul will return?"

"Not, however, until his mission is completed. In the meantime, you understand, evil reports cannot be permitted to circulate about him without my looking into them."

"And for a greater reason still, that he will remain some time in London," said De Wardes, chuckling.

"You think so," said De Guiche simply.

"Think so, indeed! do you suppose that he was sent to London for no other purpose than to go there and return again immediately? No, no; he was sent to London to remain there."

"Ah! De Wardes," said De Guiche, seizing De Wardes' hand violently, "that is a very serious suspicion concerning Bragelonne, which completely confirms what he wrote to me from Boulogne."

De Wardes resumed his former coldness of manner; his love of raillery had led him too far, and by his own imprudence he had laid himself open to attack.

"Well, tell me, what did he write to you about?" he inquired.

"He told me that you had artfully insinuated some injurious remarks against La Valliere, and that you had seemed to laugh at his great confidence in that young girl."

"Well, it is perfectly true I did so," said De Wardes, "and I was quite ready at the time to hear from the Vicomte de Bragelonne that which every man expects from another whenever anything may have been said to displease him. In the same way, for instance, if I were seeking a quarrel with you, I should tell you that madame, after having shown the greatest preference for the Duke of Buckingham, is at this moment supposed to have sent the handsome duke away for your benefit."

"Oh! that would not wound me in the slightest degree, my dear De Wardes," said De Guiche, smiling, notwithstanding the shiver which ran through his whole frame. "Why, such a favor as that would be too great a happiness."

"I admit that; but if I absolutely wished to quarrel with you, I should try and invent a falsehood, perhaps, and should speak to you about a certain arbor, where you and that illustrious princess were together—I should speak also of certain genuflections, of certain kissings of the hand; and you, who are so secret on all occasions, so hasty, and punctilious——"

"Well," said De Guiche, interrupting him, with a smile upon his lips, although he almost felt as if he were going to die; "I swear I should not care for that, nor should I in any way contradict you; for you must know, my dear marquis, that for all matters which concern myself, I am a block of ice; but it is a very different thing when an absent friend is concerned, a friend who, on leaving, confided his interests to my safe keeping; for such a friend, De Wardes, believe me, I am like fire itself."

"I understand you, Monsieur de Guiche; in spite of what you say, there cannot be any question between us just now, either of Bragelonne or of this young insignificant girl whose name is La Valliere."

At this moment some of the younger courtiers were crossing the apartment, and having already heard the few words which had just been pronounced, were able also to hear those which were about to follow. De Wardes observed this, and continued, aloud: "Oh! if La Valliere were a coquette like madame, whose very innocent flirtations, I am sure, were, first of all, the cause of the Duke of Buckingham being sent back to England, and afterward were the reason of your being sent into exile; for you will not deny, I suppose, that madame's seductive manners did have a certain influence over you?"

The courtiers drew nearer to the speakers, St. Aignan at their head, and then Manicamp.

"But, my dear fellow, whose fault was that?" said De Guiche, laughing. "I am a vain, conceited fellow, I know, and everybody else knows it, too. I took seriously that which was only intended as a jest, and I got myself exiled for my pains. But I saw my error. I overcame my vanity, and I obtained my recall by making the *amende honorable*, and by promising myself to overcome this defect; and the consequence is, that I am so thoroughly cured that I now

laugh at the very thing which, three or four days ago, would have almost broken my heart. But Raoul is in love, and is loved in return; he cannot laugh at the reports which disturb his happiness—reports which you seem to have undertaken to interpret, when you know, marquis, as I do, as those gentlemen do, as every one does, in fact, that these reports are pure calumny."

"Calumny!" exclaimed De Wardes, furious at seeing himself caught in the snare by De Guiche's coolness of temper.

"Certainly, a calumny. Look at this letter from him, in which he tells me you have spoken ill of Mademoiselle de la Valliere; and where he asks me, if what you reported about this young girl be true or not. Do you wish me to appeal to these gentlemen, De Wardes, to decide?" And with admirable coolness, De Guiche read aloud the paragraph of the letter which referred to La Valliere. "And now," continued De Guiche, "there is no doubt in the world, as far as I am concerned, that you wish to disturb Bragelonne's peace of mind, and that your remarks were maliciously intended."

De Wardes looked round him, to see if he could find support from any one; but at the idea that De Wardes had insulted, either directly or indirectly, the idol of the day, every one shook his head, and De Wardes saw that there was no one present who would have refused to say he was in the wrong.

"Messieurs," said De Guiche, intuitively divining the general feeling, "my discussion with Monsieur de Wardes refers to a subject so delicate in its nature that it is most important no one should hear more than you have already heard. Close the doors, then, I beg you, and let us finish our conversation in the manner which becomes two gentlemen, one of whom has given the other the lie."

"Messieurs, messieurs!" exclaimed those who were present.

"It is your opinion, then, that I was wrong in defending Mademoiselle de la Valliere?" said De Guiche. "In that case, I pass judgment upon myself, and am ready to withdraw the offensive words I may have used to Monsieur de Wardes."

"The deuce! certainly not!" said St. Aignan. "Mademoiselle de la Valliere is an angel."

"Virtue and purity itself," said Manicamp.

"You see, Monsieur de Wardes," said De Guiche, "I am

not the only one who undertakes the defense of that poor girl. I entreat you, therefore, messieurs, a second time, to leave us. You see, it is impossible we could be more calm and composed than we are."

It was the very thing the courtiers wished; some went out at one door, and the rest at the other, and the two young men were left alone.

"Well played," said De Wardes, to the comte.

"Was it not?" replied the latter.

"How can it be wondered at, my dear fellow; I have got quite rusty in the country, while the command you have acquired over yourself, comte, confounds me; a man always gains something in women's society; so, pray accept my congratulations."

"I do accept them."

"And I will make madame a present of them."

"And now, my dear Monsieur de Wardes, let us speak as loud as you please."

"Do not defy me."

"I do defy you, for you are known to be an evil-minded man; if you do that, you will be looked upon as a coward, too; and Monsieur would have you hanged this evening at his window-casement. Speak, my dear De Wardes, speak."

"I have fought already."

"But not quite enough yet."

"I see, you would not be sorry to fight with me while my wounds are still open."

"No; better still."

"The deuce! you are unfortunate in the moment you have chosen; a duel, after the one I have just fought, would hardly suit me; I have lost too much blood at Boulogne; at the slightest effort my wounds would open again, and you would really have too good a bargain with me."

"True," said De Guiche; "and yet, on your arrival here, your looks and your arms showed there was nothing the matter with you."

"Yes, my arms are all right, but my legs are weak; and then, I have not had a foil in my hand since that devil of a duel; and you, I am sure, have been fencing every day, in order to carry your little conspiracy against me to a successful issue."

"Upon my honor, monsieur," replied De Guiche, "it is six months since I last practiced."

"No, comte, after due reflection, I will not fight, at least, with you. I shall await Bragelonne's return, since you say that it is Bragelonne who has fault to find with me."

"Oh, no, indeed! You shall not wait until Bragelonne's return," exclaimed the comte, losing all command over himself, "for you have said that Bragelonne might possibly be some time before he returns; and, in the meanwhile, your wicked insinuations would have had their effect."

"Yet I shall have my excuse. So take care."

"I will give you a week to finish your recovery."

"That is better. So let us wait a week."

"Yes, yes, I understand; a week will give time to my adversary to make his escape. No, no; I will not give you one day, even."

"You are mad, monsieur," said De Wardes, retreating a step.

"And you are a coward, if you do not fight willingly. Nay, what is more, I will denounce you to the king, as having refused to fight, after having insulted La Valliere."

"Ah!" said De Wardes, "you are dangerously treacherous, though you pass for a man of honor."

"There is nothing more dangerous than the treachery, as you term it, of the man whose conduct is always loyal and upright."

"Restore me the use of my legs, then, or get yourself bled, till you are as white as I am, so as to equalize our chances."

"No, no; I have something better than that to propose."

"What is it?"

"We will fight on horseback, and will exchange three pistol-shots each. You are a first-rate marksman. I have seen you bring down swallows with single balls, and at full gallop. Do not deny it, for I have seen you myself."

"I believe you are right," said De Wardes; "and as that is the case, it is not unlikely I might kill you."

"You would be rendering me a very great service if you did."

"I will do my best."

"Is it agreed? Give me your hand upon it."

"There it is; but on one condition, however."

"Name it."

"That not a word shall be said about it to the king."

"Not a word, I swear."

"I shall go and get my horse, then."

"And I mine."

"Where shall we meet?"

"In the open plain; I know an admirable place."

"Shall we go together?"

"Why not?"

And both of them, on their way to the stables, passed beneath madame's windows, which were faintly lighted; a shadow could be seen behind the lace curtains. "There is a woman," said De Wardes, smiling, "who does not suspect that we are going to fight—to die, perhaps, on her account."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE COMBAT.

De Wardes and De Guiche selected their horses, and then saddled them with their own hands, with holster saddles. De Guiche, having two pairs of pistols, went to his apartments to get them; and after having loaded them, gave the choice to De Wardes, who selected the pair he had made use of twenty times before—the same, indeed, with which De Guiche had seen him kill swallows flying. "You will not be surprised," he said, "if I take every precaution. You know the weapons well, and, consequently, I am only making the chances equal."

"Your remark was quite useless," replied De Guiche, "and you have done no more than you are entitled to do."

"Now," said De Wardes, "I beg you to have the goodness to help me to mount; for I still experience a little difficulty in doing so."

"In that case, we had better settle the matter on foot."

"No; once in the saddle, I shall be all right."

"Very good, then; so we will not speak of it again," said De Guiche, as he assisted De Wardes to mount his horse.

"And now," continued the young man, "in our eagerness to kill each other, we have neglected one circumstance."

"What is that?"

"That it is quite dark, and we shall almost be obliged to grope about in order to kill each other."

"Oh!" said De Guiche, "you are as anxious as I am that everything should be done in proper order."

"Yes; but I do not wish people to say that you have assassinated me, any more than, supposing I were to kill you, I should myself like to be accused of such a crime."

"Did any one make a similar remark about your duel with the Duke of Buckingham?" said De Guiche; "it took place precisely under the same conditions as ours."

"Very true; but there was still light enough to see by;

and we were up to our middles, almost, in the water; besides, there was a good number of spectators on shore, looking at us."

"De Guiche reflected for a moment; and the thought which had already presented itself to him became more confirmed—that De Wardes wished to have witnesses present, in order to bring back the conversation about madame, and to give a new turn to the combat. He avoided saying a word in reply, therefore; and, as De Wardes once more looked at him interrogatively, he replied, by a movement of the head, that it would be best to let things remain as they were. The two adversaries consequently set off, and left the château by the same gate, close to which we may remember to have seen Montalais and Malicorne together. The night, as if to counteract the extreme heat of the day, had gathered the clouds together in masses which were moving slowly along from the west to the east. The vault above, without a clear spot anywhere visible, or without the faintest indication of thunder, seemed to hang heavily over the earth, and soon began, by the force of the wind, to be split up into fragments, like a huge sheet torn into shreds. Large and warm drops of rain began to fall heavily, and gathered the dust into globules, which rolled along the ground. At the same time the hedges, which seemed conscious of the approaching storm, the thirsty plants, the drooping branches of the trees, exhaled a thousand aromatic odors, which revived in the mind tender recollections, thoughts of youth, endless life, happiness, and love. "How fresh the earth smells," said De Wardes; "it is a piece of coquetry of hers to draw us to her."

"By the bye," replied De Guiche, "several ideas have just occurred to me; and I wish to have your opinion upon them."

"Relative to——"

"Relative to our engagement."

"It is quite time, in fact, that we should begin to arrange matters."

"Is it to be an ordinary combat, and conducted according to established custom?"

"Let me know first what your established custom is."

"That we dismount in any particular plain that may suit us, then fasten our horses to the nearest object, meet each other with our pistols in our hands, afterward retire for a hundred and fifty paces, in order to advance on each other."

"Very good; that is precisely the way in which I killed poor Follinent, three weeks ago, at St. Denis."

"I beg your pardon, but you forget one circumstance."

"What is that?"

"That in your duel with Follinent you advanced toward each other on foot, your swords between your teeth, and your pistols in your hands."

"True."

"While now, on the contrary, as I cannot walk, you yourself admit that we shall have to mount our horses again, and charge, and the first who wishes to fire will do so."

"That is the best course, no doubt; but it is quite dark; we must make allowance for more missed shots than would be the case in the daytime."

"Very well; each will fire three times; the pair of pistols already loaded, and one reload."

"Excellent! Where shall our engagement take place?"

"Have you any preference?"

"No."

"You see that small wood which lies before us."

"The wood which is called Rochin?"

"Exactly."

"You know it, then?"

"Perfectly."

"You know that there is an open glade in the center?"

"Yes."

"Well, this glade is admirably adapted for such a purpose, with a variety of roads, by-places, paths, ditches, windings, and avenues. We could not find a better spot."

"I am perfectly satisfied, if you are so. We have arrived, if I am not mistaken."

"Yes. Look at the beautiful open space in the center. The faint light which the stars afford seems concentrated in this spot; the woods which surround it seem, with their barriers, to form its natural limits."

"Very good. Do, then, as you say."

"Let us first settle the conditions."

"These are mine; if you have any objection to make, you will state it."

"I am listening."

"If the horse be killed, its rider will be obliged to fight on foot."

"That is a matter of course, since we have no change of horses here."

"But that does not oblige his adversary to dismount."

"His adversary will, in fact, be free to act as he likes."

"The adversaries, having once met in close contact, can-

not quit each other under any circumstances, and may consequently fire muzzle to muzzle."

"Agreed."

"Three shots and no more will do, I suppose?"

"Quite sufficient, I think. Here are powder and balls for your pistols; measure out three charges, take three balls; I will do the same; then we will throw the rest of the powder and the balls away."

"And we will solemnly swear," said De Wardes, "that we have neither balls nor powder about us?"

"Agreed; and I swear it," said De Guiche, holding his hand toward heaven, a gesture which De Wardes imitated.

"And now, my dear comte," said De Wardes, "allow me to tell you that I am in no way your dupe. You already are, or soon will be, the accepted lover of madame. I have detected your secret, and you are afraid I shall tell others of it. You wish to kill me to insure my silence; that is very clear; and in your place, I should do the same." De Guiche hung down his head. "Only," continued De Wardes triumphantly, "was it really worth while, tell me, to throw this affair of Bragelonne's upon my shoulders? But take care, my dear fellow, in bringing the wild boar to bay, you enrage him to madness; in running down the fox, you give him the ferocity of the jaguar. The consequence is that, brought to bay by you, I shall defend myself to the very last."

"You will be quite right in doing so."

"Yes; but take care; I shall work more harm than you think. In the first place, as a beginning, you will readily suppose that I have not been absurd enough to lock up my secret, or your secret rather, in my own breast. There is a friend of mine, who resembles me in every way, a man whom you know very well, who shares my secret with me; so, pray understand that if you kill me, my death will not have been of much service to you; while, on the contrary, if I kill you—and everything is possible, you know—you understand?" De Guiche shuddered. "If I kill you," continued De Wardes, "you will have secured two mortal enemies to madame, who will do their very utmost to ruin her."

"Oh! monsieur," exclaimed De Guiche furiously, "do not reckon upon my death so easily. Of the two enemies you speak of, I trust most heartily to dispose of one immediately, and the other at the earliest possible opportunity."

The only reply De Wardes made was a burst of laughter,

so diabolical in its sound that a superstitious man would have been terrified by it. But De Guiche was not so impressionable as that. "I think," he said, "that everything is now settled, Monsieur de Wardes; so have the goodness to take your place first, unless you would prefer me to do so."

"By no means," said De Wardes. "I shall be delighted to save you the slightest trouble." And putting his horse into a gallop, he crossed the wide open space and took his stand at that point of circumference of the crossroad which was immediately opposite to where De Guiche was stationed. De Guiche remained motionless. At the distance of a hundred paces, the two adversaries were absolutely invisible to each other, being completely concealed by the thick shade of elms and chestnuts. A minute elapsed amid the profoundest silence. At the end of the minute each of them, in the deep shade of which he was concealed, heard the double click of the trigger, as they put the pistols on full cock. De Guiche, adopting the usual tactics, set his horse into a gallop, persuaded that he should render his safety doubly sure, both by the movement, as well as by the speed of the animal. He directed his course in a straight line toward the point where, in his opinion, De Wardes would be stationed; and he expected to meet De Wardes about halfway; but in this he was mistaken. He continued his course, presuming that his adversary was impatiently awaiting his approach. When, however, he had gone about two thirds of the distance, he saw the place suddenly illuminated and a ball flew by, cutting the plume of his hat in two. Nearly at the same moment, and as if the flash of the first shot had served to indicate the direction of the other, a second report was heard, and a second ball passed through the head of De Guiche's horse, a little below the ear. The animal fell. These two reports, proceeding from the very opposite direction to that in which he expected to find De Wardes, surprised him a great deal; but as he was a man of amazing self-possession, he prepared himself for his horse falling, but not so completely, however, that the toe of his boot escaped being caught under the animal as it fell. Very fortunately the horse in its dying agonies moved so as to enable him to release the leg which was less entangled than the other. De Guiche rose, felt himself all over, and found that he was not wounded. At the very moment he had felt the horse tottering under him he had placed his pistols in the holsters, afraid that the force of

the fall might explode one at least, if not both of them, by which he would have been disarmed, and left utterly without defense. Once upon his feet, he took the pistols out of the holsters, and advanced toward the spot, where, by the light of the flash, he had seen De Wardes appear. De Guiche had, at the first shot, accounted for the maneuver, than which nothing could have been simpler. Instead of advancing to meet De Guiche, or remaining in his place to await his approach, De Wardes, had, for about fifteen paces, followed the circle of the shadow which hid him from his adversary's observation, and at the very moment when the latter presented his flank in his career, he had fired from the place where he stood, carefully taking his aim, and assisted instead of being inconvenienced by the horse's gallop. It has been seen that, notwithstanding the darkness, the first ball had passed hardly more than an inch above De Guiche's head. De Wardes had so confidently relied upon his aim that he thought he had seen De Guiche fall; his astonishment was extreme when he saw that he still remained erect in his saddle. He hastened to fire his second shot, but his hand trembled, and he killed the horse instead. It would be a most fortunate chance for him if De Guiche were to remain held fast under the animal. Before he could have freed himself, De Wardes would have loaded his pistol and had De Guiche at his mercy. But De Guiche, on the contrary, was up and had three shots to fire. De Guiche immediately understood the position of affairs. It would be necessary to exceed De Wardes in rapidity of execution. He advanced, therefore, so as to reach him before he should have time to reload his pistol. De Wardes saw him approaching like a tempest. The ball was rather tight, and offered some resistance to the ramrod. To load it carelessly would be to expose himself to lose his last chance; to take the proper care in loading it would be to lose his time, or, rather, it would be throwing away his life. He made his horse bound on one side. De Guiche turned round also, and at the moment the horse was quiet again he fired, and the ball carried off De Wardes' hat from his head. De Wardes now knew that he had a moment's time at his own disposal; he availed himself of it in order to finish loading his pistol. De Guiche, noticing that his adversary did not fall, threw the pistol he had just discharged aside, and walked straight toward De Wardes, elevating the second pistol as he did so. He had hardly proceeded more than two or three paces, when De Wardes took aim at him as he

was walking and fired. An exclamation of anger was De Guiche's answer; the comte's arm contracted and dropped motionless by his side, and the pistol fell from his grasp. De Wardes observed the comte stoop down, pick up his pistol with his left hand, and again advance toward him. His anxiety was excessive. "I am lost," murmured De Wardes, "he is not mortally wounded." At the very moment, however, that De Guiche was about to raise his pistol against De Wardes, the head, shoulders, and limbs of the comte all seemed to give way. He heaved a deep-drawn sigh, tottered, and fell at the feet of De Wardes' horse.

"That is all right," said De Wardes, and gathering up the reins, he struck his spurs into his horse's sides. The horse cleared the comte's motionless body, and bore De Wardes rapidly back to the château. When he arrived there he remained a quarter of an hour deliberating within himself as to the proper course to be adopted. In his impatience to leave the field of battle he had omitted to ascertain whether De Guiche were dead or not. A double hypothesis presented itself to De Wardes' agitated mind; either De Guiche was killed, or De Guiche was wounded only. If he were killed, why should he leave his body in that manner to the tender mercies of the wolves; it was a perfectly useless piece of cruelty, for if De Guiche were dead, he certainly could not breathe a syllable of what had passed; if he were not killed, why should he, De Wardes, in leaving him there uncared for, allow himself to be regarded as a savage, incapable of one generous feeling? This last consideration determined his line of conduct.

De Wardes immediately instituted inquiries after Manicamp. He was told that Manicamp had been looking after De Guiche, and, not knowing where to find him, had retired to bed. De Wardes went and woke the sleeper without any delay, and related the whole affair to him, which Manicamp listened to in pefect silence, but with an expression of momentarily increasing energy, of which his face could hardly have been supposed capable. It was only when De Wardes had finished that Manicamp uttered the words, "Let us go."

As they proceeded Manicamp became more and more excited, and in proportion as De Wardes related the details of the affair to him, his countenance assumed every moment a darkening expression. "And so," he said, when De Wardes had finished, "you think he is dead?"

"Alas, I do."

"And you fought in that manner, without witnesses?"

"He insisted upon it."

"It is very singular."

"What do you mean by saying it is singular?"

"That it is so very unlike Monsieur de Guiche's disposition."

"You do not doubt my word, I suppose?"

"Hum! hum!"

"You do doubt it, then?"

"A little. But I shall doubt it more than ever, I warn you, if I find the poor fellow is really dead."

"Monsieur Manicamp!"

"Monsieur de Wardes!"

"It seems you intend to insult me!"

"Just as you please. The fact is, I never could like those people who come and say, 'I have killed such and such a gentleman in a corner; it is a great pity, but I killed him in a perfectly honorable manner.' It has a very ugly appearance, Monsieur de Wardes."

"Silence! we have arrived."

In fact, the open glade could now be seen, and in the open space lay the motionless body of the dead horse. To the right of the horse, upon the dark grass, with his face against the ground, the poor comte lay, bathed in his blood. He had remained in the same spot, and did not even seem to have made the slightest movement. Manicamp threw himself on his knees, lifted the comte in his arms, and found him quite cold, and steeped in blood. He let him gently fall again. Then, stretching out his hand and feeling all over the ground close to where the comte lay, he sought until he found De Guiche's pistol.

"By heaven!" he said, rising to his feet, pale as death, and with the pistol in his hand, "you are not mistaken, he is quite dead."

"Dead!" repeated De Wardes.

"Yes; and his pistol is still loaded," added Manicamp, looking into the pan.

"But I told you that I took aim as he was walking toward me, and fired at him at the very moment he was going to fire at me."

"Are you quite sure that you have fought with him, Monsieur de Wardes? I confess that I am very much afraid it has been a foul assassination. Nay, nay, no exclamations! You have had your three shots, and his pistol is still loaded. You have killed his horse, and he, De Guiche, one of the

best marksmen in France, has not touched even either your horse or yourself. Well, Monsieur de Wardes, you have been very unlucky in bringing me here; all the blood in my body seems to have mounted to my head; and I verily believe that since so good an opportunity presents itself, I shall blow out your brains on the spot. So, Monsieur de Wardes, recommend your soul to heaven."

"Monsieur Manicamp, you cannot think of such a thing!"

"On the contrary, I am thinking of it very strongly."

"Would you assassinate me?"

"Without the slightest remorse, at least, for the present."

"Are you a gentleman?"

"I have given a great many proofs of it."

"Let me defend my life then at least."

"Very likely; in order, I suppose, that you may do to me what you have done to poor De Guiche."

And Manicamp slowly raised his pistol to the height of De Wardes' breast, and, with arm stretched out, and a fixed, determined look on his face, took a careful aim. De Wardes did not attempt a flight; he was completely terrified. In the midst, however, of this horrible silence, which lasted about a second, but which seemed an age to De Wardes, a faint sigh was heard.

"Oh!" exclaimed De Wardes, "he still lives. Help, De Guiche, I am about to be assassinated!"

Manicamp fell back a step or two, and the two young men saw the comte raise himself slowly and painfully upon one hand. Manicamp threw the pistol away a dozen paces, and ran to his friend, uttering a cry of delight. De Wardes wiped his forehead, which was covered with a cold perspiration.

"It was just in time," he murmured.

"Where are you hurt?" inquired Manicamp of De Guiche, "and whereabouts are you wounded?"

De Guiche showed him his mutilated hand and his chest covered with blood.

"Comte," exclaimed De Wardes, "I am accused of having assassinated you. Speak, I implore you, and say that I fought loyally."

"Perfectly so," said the wounded man; "Monsieur de Wardes fought quite loyally, and whoever may say the contrary will make me his enemy."

"Then, sir," said Manicamp, "assist me, in the first place, to carry this fellow back, and I will afterward give you every satisfaction you please; or, if you are in a hurry, we

can do better still; let us stanch the blood from the comte's wounds here, with your pocket-handkerchief and mine, and then, as there are two shots left, we can have them between us."

"Thank you," said De Wardes. "Twice already, in one hour, I have seen death too close at hand to be agreeable; I don't like his look at all, and I prefer your apologies."

Manicamp burst out laughing, and De Guiche, too, in spite of his sufferings. The two young men wished to carry him, but he declared he felt quite strong enough to walk alone. The ball had broken his ring-finger and his little finger, and then had glanced along his side, but without penetrating deeply into his chest. It was the pain rather than the seriousness of the wound, therefore, which had overcome De Guiche. Manicamp passed his arm under one of the comte's shoulders, and De Wardes did the same with the other, and in this way they brought him back to Fontainebleau, to the house of the same doctor who had been present at the death of the Franciscan, Aramis' predecessor.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE KING'S SUPPER.

THE king, while these matters were being arranged, had sat down to the supper-table, and the not very large number of guests invited for that day had taken their seats, after the usual gesture intimating the royal permission to be seated. At this period of Louis XIV.'s reign, although etiquette was not governed by the strict regulations which subsequently were adopted, the French court had entirely thrown aside the traditions of good-fellowship and patriarchal affability which existed in the time of Henry IV., and which the suspicious mind of Louis XIII. had gradually replaced by the pompous state forms and ceremonies which he despaired of being able to fully realize.

The king, therefore, was seated alone at a small separate table, which, like the desk of a president, overlooked the adjoining tables. Although we say a small table, we must not omit to add that this small table was the largest one there. Moreover, it was the one on which were placed the greatest number and quantity of dishes, consisting of fish, game, meat, fruit, vegetables, and preserves. The king was young and full of vigor and energy, very fond of hunt-

ing, addicted to all violent exercises of the body, possessing, besides, like all the members of the Bourbon family, a rapid digestion and an appetite speedily renewed. Louis XIV. was a formidable table-companion; he delighted to criticise his cooks; but when he honored them by praise and commendation, the honor was overwhelming. The king began by eating several kinds of soup, either mixed together or taken separately. He intermixed or rather, he separated, each of the soups by a glass of old wine. He ate quickly, and somewhat greedily. Porthos, who from the beginning had, out of respect, been waiting for a jog of D'Artagnan's arm, seeing the king make such rapid progress, turned to the musketeer and said, in a low tone:

"It seems as if one might go on now; his majesty is very encouraging, from the example he sets. Look."

"The king eats," said D'Artagnan, "but he talks at the same time; try and manage matters in such manner that, if he should happen to address a remark to you, he should not find you with your mouth full, which would be very disrespectful."

"The best way, in that case," said Porthos, "is to eat no supper at all; and yet I am very hungry, I admit, and everything looks and smells most invitingly, as if appealing to all my senses at once."

"Don't think of not eating, for a moment," said D'Artagnan; "that would put his majesty out terribly. The king has a saying, 'that he who works well, eats well,' and he does not like people to eat indifferently at his table."

"How can I avoid having my mouth full if I eat?" said Porthos.

"All you have to do," replied the captain of the musketeers, "is simply to swallow what you have in it, whenever the king does you the honor to address a remark to you."

"Very good," said Porthos; and from that moment he began to eat with a well-bred enthusiasm of manner.

The king occasionally looked at the different persons who were at table with him, and *en connoisseur*, could appreciate the different dispositions of his guests.

"Monsieur du Vallon!" he said.

Porthos was enjoying a salmi de lièvre, and swallowed half of the back. His name pronounced in such a manner had made him start, and by a vigorous effort of his gullet he absorbed the whole mouthful.

"Sire," replied Porthos, in a stifled voice, but sufficiently intelligible, nevertheless.

"Let those filets d'agneau be handed to Monsieur du Vallon," said the king; "do you like brown meats, Monsieur du Vallon?"

"Sire, I like everything," replied Porthos.

D'Artagnan whispered:

"Everything your majesty sends me."

Porthos repeated:

"Everything your majesty sends me," an observation which the king apparently received with great satisfaction.

"People eat well, who work well," replied the king, delighted to have *en tête-à-tête* a guest who could eat as Porthos did. Porthos received the dish of lamb, and put a portion of it on his own plate.

"Well?" said the king.

"Exquisite," said Porthos calmly.

"Have you as good mutton in your part of the country, Monsieur du Vallon?" continued the king.

"Sire, I believe that from my own province, as everywhere else, the best of everything is sent to Paris for your majesty's use; but on the other hand, I do not eat lamb in the same way your majesty does."

"Ah! ah! and how do you eat it?"

"Generally, I have a lamb dressed quite whole."

"Quite whole?"

"Yes, sire."

"In what manner, then?"

"In this, sire: my cook, who is a German, first stuffs the lamb in question with small sausages, which he procures from Strasburg, force-meat balls, which he procures from Troyes, and larks, which he procures from Pithiviers; by some means or other, which I am not acquainted with, he bones the lamb as he would do a fowl, leaving the skin on, however, which forms a brown crust all over the animal; when it is cut in beautiful slices, in the same way as an enormous sausage, a rose-colored gravy pours forth, which is as agreeable to the eye as it is exquisite to the palate."

And Porthos finished by smacking his lips.

The king opened his eyes with delight, and, while cutting some of the faisan en daubee, which was being handed to him, he said:

"That is a dish I should very much like to taste, Monsieur du Vallon. Is it possible—a whole lamb?"

"Completely so, sire."

"Pass those pheasants to Monsieur du Vallon; I perceive he is an amateur."

The order was immediately obeyed. Then, continuing the conversation, he said:

"And you do not find the lamb too fat?"

"No, sire; the fat falls down at the same time as the gravy does, and swims on the surface; then the servant who carves removes the fat with a spoon, which I have had expressly made for that purpose."

"Where do you reside?" inquired the king.

"At Pierrefonds, sire."

"At Pierrefonds? Where is that, Monsieur du Vallon—near Belle-Isle?"

"Oh, no, sire; Pierrefonds is in the Soissonnais."

"I thought you alluded to the lamb on account of the salt marshes."

"No, sire; I have marshes which are not salt, it is true, but which are not the less valuable on that account."

The king had now arrived at the *entremets*, but without losing sight of Porthos, who continued to play his part in the best manner.

"You have an excellent appetite, Monsieur du Vallon," said the king, "and you make an admirable guest at table."

"Ah, sire, if your majesty were ever to pay a visit to Pierrefonds, we would both of us eat our lamb together; for your appetite is not an indifferent one, by any means."

D'Artagnan gave Porthos a severe kick under the table, which made Porthos color up.

"At your majesty's present happy age," said Porthos, in order to repair the mistake he had made, "I was in the musketeers, and nothing could ever satisfy me then. Your majesty has an excellent appetite, as I have already had the honor of mentioning, but you select what you eat with too much refinement to be called a great eater."

The king seemed charmed at his guest's politeness.

"Will you try some of these creams?" he said to Porthos.

"Sire, your majesty treats me with far too much kindness to prevent me speaking the whole truth."

"Pray do so, Monsieur du Vallon."

"Well, sire, with regard to sweet dishes, I only recognize pastry, and even that should be rather solid; all these frothy substances swell the stomach and occupy a space which seems to me to be too precious to be so badly tenanted."

"Ah! gentlemen," said the king, indicating Porthos by a gesture, "here is indeed a perfect model of gastronomy. It was in such a manner that our fathers, who so well knew

what good living was, used to eat, while we," added his majesty, "can do nothing but trifle with our food."

And as he spoke, he took the breast of a chicken with ham, while Porthos attacked a dish of partridges and land-rails. The cup-bearer filled his majesty's glass.

"Give Monsieur du Vallon some of my wine," said the king.

This was one of the greatest honors of the royal table. D'Artagnan pressed his friend's knee.

"If you could only manage to swallow the half of that boar's head I see yonder," said he to Porthos, "I shall believe you will be a duke and peer within the next twelvemonth."

"Presently," said Porthos phlegmatically; "I shall come to it by and by."

In fact, it was not long before it came to the boar's turn, for the king seemed to take a pleasure in urging on his guest; he did not pass any of the dishes to Porthos until he had tasted them himself, and he accordingly took some of the boar's head. Porthos showed that he could keep pace with his sovereign; and instead of eating the half, as D'Artagnan had told him, he ate three-quarters of it.

"It is impossible," said the king, in an undertone, "that a gentleman who eats so good a supper every day, and who has such beautiful teeth, can be otherwise than the most straightforward, upright man in my kingdom."

"Do you hear?" said D'Artagnan, in his friend's ear.

"Yes; I think I am rather in favor," said Porthos, balancing himself on his chair.

"Oh! you are in luck's way."

The king and Porthos continued to eat in the same manner, to the great satisfaction of the other guests, some of whom, from emulation, had attempted to follow them, but had been obliged to give up on the way. The king soon began to get flushed, and the reaction of the blood to his face announced that the moment of repletion had arrived. It was then that Louis XIV., instead of becoming gay and cheerful, as most good livers generally do, became dull, melancholy, and taciturn. Porthos, on the contrary, was lively and communicative. D'Artagnan's foot had more than once to remind him of this peculiarity of the king. The dessert now made its appearance. The king had ceased to think anything further of Porthos; he turned his eyes anxiously toward the entrance door, and he was heard occasionally to inquire how it happened that M. de St. Aignan

was so long in arriving. At last, at the moment when his majesty was finishing a pot of preserved plums with a deep sigh, St. Aignan appeared. The king's eyes, which had become somewhat dull, immediately began to sparkle. The comte advanced toward the king's table, and Louis arose at his approach. Everybody arose at the same time, including Porthos, who was just finishing an almond-cake capable of making the jaws of a crocodile stick together. The supper was over.

CHAPTER XV.

AFTER SUPPER.

THE king took St. Aignan by the arm, and passed into the adjoining apartment.

"What has detained you, comte?" said the king.

"I was bringing the answer, sire," replied the comte.

"She has taken a long time to reply to what I wrote her."

"Sire, your majesty has deigned to write in verse, and Mademoiselle de la Valliere wished to repay your majesty in the same coin; that is to say, in gold."

"Verses! St. Aignan," exclaimed the king, in ecstasy, "give them to me at once."

And Louis broke the seal of a little letter, inclosing the verses which history has preserved entire for us, and which are more meritorious in intention than in execution. Such as they were, however, the king was enchanted with them, and exhibited his satisfaction by unequivocal transports of delight; but the universal silence which reigned in the rooms warned Louis, so sensitively particular with regard to good-breeding, that his delight might give rise to various interpretations. He turned aside and put the note in his pocket, and then advancing a few steps, which brought him again to the threshold of the door close to his guests, he said:

"Monsieur du Vallon, I have seen you to-day with the greatest pleasure, and my pleasure will be equally great to see you again."

Porthos bowed as the Colossus of Rhodes would have done, and retired from the room with his face toward the king.

"Monsieur d'Artagnan," continued the king, "you will await my orders in the gallery; I am obliged to you for hav-

ing made me acquainted with Monsieur du Vallon. Gentlemen," addressing himself to the other guests, "I return to Paris to-morrow, on account of the departure of the Spanish and Dutch ambassadors. Until to-morrow, then."

The apartment was immediately cleared of the guests. The king took St. Aignan by the arm, made him read La Valliere's verses over again, and said:

"What do you think of them?"

"Charming, sire."

"They charm me, in fact; and if they were known——"

"Oh! the professional poets would be jealous of them; but it is not at all likely they will know anything about them."

"Did you give her mine?"

"Oh, sire, she positively devoured them."

"They were very weak, I am afraid."

"That is not what Mademoiselle de la Valliere said of them."

"Do you think she was pleased with them?"

"I am sure of it, sire."

"I must answer them, then."

"Oh, sire, immediately after supper? Your majesty will fatigue yourself."

"You're right; study after eating is very injurious."

"The labor of a poet especially so; and, besides, there is great excitement prevailing at Mademoiselle de la Valliere's."

"What do you mean?"

"With her as with all the ladies of the court."

"Why?"

"On account of poor De Guiche's accident."

"Has anything serious happened to De Guiche, then?"

"Yes, sire; he has one hand nearly destroyed, a hole in his breast; in fact, he is dying."

"Good heavens! who told you that?"

"Manicamp brought him back just now to the house of a doctor here in Fontainebleau, and the rumor soon reached us all here."

"Brought back! Poor De Guiche; and how did it happen?"

"Ah! that is the very question. How did it happen?"

"You say that in a very singular manner, St. Aignan. Give me the details. What does he say, himself?"

'He says nothing, sire; but others do."

"What others?"

"Those who brought him back, sire."

"Who are they?"

"I do not know, sire; but Monsieur de Manicamp knows. Monsieur de Manicamp is one of his friends."

"As everybody is, indeed," said the king.

"Oh, no!" returned St. Aignan; "you are mistaken, sire; every one is not precisely friends with Monsieur de Guiche."

"How do you know that?"

"Does your majesty require me to explain myself?"

"Certainly I do."

"Well, sire, I believe I have heard something said about a quarrel between two gentlemen."

"When?"

"This very evening, before your majesty's supper was served."

"That can hardly be. I have issued such stringent and severe ordinances with respect to dueling that no one, I presume, would dare to disobey them."

"In that case, Heaven preserve me from excusing any one!" exclaimed St. Aignan. "Your majesty commanded me to speak, and I spoke accordingly."

"Tell me, then, in what way the Comte de Guiche has been wounded?"

"Sire, it is said to have been at a boar-hunt."

"This evening?"

"Yes, sire."

"One of his hands shattered, and a hole in his breast. Who was at the hunt with Monsieur de Guiche?"

"I do not know, sire; but Monsieur de Manicamp knows, or ought to know."

"You are concealing something from me, St. Aignan."

"Nothing, sire, I assure you."

"Then, explain to me how the accident happened; was it a musket that burst?"

"Very likely, sire. But yet, on reflection, it could hardly have been that, for De Guiche's pistol was found close by him, still loaded."

"His pistol? But a man does not go to a boar-hunt with a pistol, I should think."

"Sire, it is also said that De Guiche's horse was killed, and that the horse is still to be found in the wide-open glade in the forest."

"His horse? De Guiche go on horseback to a boar-hunt? St. Aignan, I do not understand a syllable of what you have been telling me. Where did the affair happen?"

"At the Rond-point, in that part of the forest called the Bois-Rochin."

"That will do. Call Monsieur d'Artagnan."

St. Aignan obeyed, and the musketeer entered.

"Monsieur d'Artagnan," said the king, "you will leave this place by the little door of the private staircase."

"Yes, sire."

"You will mount your horse."

"Yes, sire."

"And you will proceed to the Rond-point du Bois-Rochin. Do you know the spot?"

"Yes, sire. I have fought there twice."

"What!" exclaimed the king, amazed at the reply.

"Under the edicts, sire, of Cardinal Richelieu," returned D'Artagnan, with his usual impassibility.

"That is very different, monsieur. You will, therefore, go there and will examine the locality very carefully. A man has been wounded there, and you will find a horse lying dead. You will tell me what your opinion is upon the whole affair."

"Very good, sire."

"It is a matter of course that it is your own opinion I require, and not that of any one else."

"You shall have it in an hour's time, sire."

"I prohibit your speaking with any one, whoever it may be."

"Except with the person who must give me a lantern," said D'Artagnan.

"Oh! that is a matter of course," said the king, laughing at the liberty, which he tolerated in no one but his captain of musketeers.

D'Artagnan left by the little staircase.

"Now, let my physician be sent for," said Louis. Ten minutes afterward the king's physician arrived, quite out of breath.

"You will go, monsieur," said the king to him, "and accompany Monsieur de St. Aignan wherever he may take you; you will render me an account of the state of the person you may see in the house you will be taken to."

The physician obeyed without a remark, as at that time people began to obey Louis XIV., and left the room preceding St. Aignan.

"Do you, St. Aignan, send Manicamp to me before the physician can possibly have spoken to him."

And St. Aignan left in his turn.

CHAPTER XVI.

SHOWING IN WHAT WAY D'ARTAGNAN DISCHARGED THE MISSION WITH WHICH THE KING HAD INTRUSTED HIM.

WHILE the king was engaged in making these last-mentioned arrangements in order to ascertain the truth, D'Artagnan, without losing a second, ran to the stable, took down the lantern, saddled his horse himself, and proceeded toward the place which his majesty had indicated. According to the promise he had made, he had neither seen nor met any one; and, as we have observed, he had carried his scruples so far as to do without the assistance of the helpers in the stables altogether. D'Artagnan was one of those who, in moments of difficulty, pride themselves on increasing their own value. By dint of hard galloping, he in less than five minutes reached the wood, fastened his horse to the first tree he came to, and penetrated to the broad open space on foot. He then began to inspect most carefully, on foot, and with his lantern in his hand, the whole surface of the Rond-point, went forward, turned back again, measured, examined, and after half an hour's minute inspection, he returned silently to where he had left his horse, and pursued his way in deep reflection and at a foot-pace to Fontainebleau. Louis was waiting in his cabinet; he was alone, and with a pencil was scribbling on paper certain lines which D'Artagnan at the first glance recognized as being very unequal and very much scratched about. The conclusion he arrived at was that they must be verses. The king raised his head and perceived D'Artagnan.

"Well, monsieur," he said, "do you bring me any news?"

"Yes, sire."

"What have you seen?"

"As far as probability goes, sire," D'Artagnan began to reply.

"It was certainty I requested of you."

"I will approach it as near as I possibly can. The weather was very well adapted for investigations of the character I have just made; it has been raining this evening, and the roads were wet and muddy——"

"Well, the result, Monsieur d'Artagnan?"

"Sire, your majesty told me that there was a horse lying dead in the cross-road of the Bois-Rochin, and I began, therefore, by studying the roads. I say the roads, because the center of the cross-road is reached by four separate

roads. The one that I myself took was the only one that presented any fresh traces. Two horses had followed it side by side; their eight feet were marked very distinctly in the clay. One of the riders was more impatient than the other, for the footprints of the one were invariably in advance of the other about half a horse's length."

"Are you quite sure they came together?" said the king.

"Yes, sire. The horses are two rather large animals of equal pace—horses well used to maneuvers of all kinds, for they wheeled round the barrier of the Rond-point together."

"Well—and after?"

"The two cavaliers paused there for a minute, no doubt to arrange the conditions of the engagement; the horses grew restless and impatient. One of the riders spoke, while the other listened and seemed to have contented himself by simply answering. His horse pawed the ground, which proves that his attention was so taken up by listening that he let the bridle fall from his hand."

"A hostile meeting did take place, then?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Continue; you are a most accurate observer."

"One of the two cavaliers remained where he was standing, the one, in fact, who had been listening; the other crossed the open space, and at first placed himself directly opposite to his adversary. The one who had remained stationary traversed the Rond-point at a gallop, about two-thirds of its length, thinking that by this means he would gain upon his opponent; but the latter had followed the circumference of the wood."

"You are ignorant of their names, I suppose?"

"Completely so, sire. Only he who followed the circumference of the wood was mounted on a black horse."

"How do you know that?"

"I found a few hairs of his tail among the brambles which bordered the sides of the ditch."

"Go on."

"As for the other horse, there can be no trouble in describing him, since he was left dead on the field of battle."

"What was the cause of his death?"

"A ball which had passed through his temple."

"Was the ball that of a pistol or a gun?"

"It was a pistol-bullet, sire. Besides, the manner in which the horse was wounded explained to me the tactics of the man who had killed it. He had followed the circumference of the wood in order to take his adversary in flank. Moreover, I followed his foot-track on the grass."

"The tracks of the black horse, do you mean?"

"Yes, sire."

"Go on, Monsieur d'Artagnan."

"As your majesty now perceives the position of the two adversaries, I will, for a moment, leave the cavalier who had remained stationary for the one who started off at a gallop."

"Do so."

"The horse of the cavalier who rode at full speed was killed on the spot."

"How do you know that?"

"The cavalier had not time even to throw himself off his horse, and so fell with it. I observed the impression of his leg, which, with a great effort, he was enabled to extricate from under the horse. The spur, pressed down by the weight of the animal, had plowed up the ground."

"Very good; and what did he do as soon as he rose up again?"

"He walked straight up to his adversary."

"Who still remained upon the verge of the forest?"

"Yes, sire. Then, having reached a favorable distance, he stopped firmly, for the impression of both his heels are left in the ground quite close to each other, fired, and missed his adversary."

"How do you know he did not hit him?"

"I found a hat with a ball through it."

"Ah, a proof, then!" exclaimed the king.

"Insufficient, sire," replied D'Artagnan coldly; "it is a hat without any letters indicating its ownership, without arms; a red feather, as all hats have; the lace, even, had nothing particular in it."

"Did the man with the hat through which the bullet had passed fire a second time?"

"Oh, sire, he had already fired twice."

"How did you ascertain that?"

"I found the waddings of the pistol."

"And what became of the bullet which did not kill the horse?"

"It cut in two the feather of the hat belonging to him against whom it was directed, and broke a small birch at the other end of the open glade."

"In that case, then, the man on the black horse was disarmed, while his adversary had still one more shot to fire?"

"Sire, while the dismounted rider was extricating himself from his horse, the other was reloading his pistol.

Only, he was much agitated while he was loading it, and his hand trembled greatly."

"How do you know that?"

"Half the charge fell to the ground, and he threw the ramrod aside, not having time to replace it in the pistol."

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, it is marvelous what you tell me!"

"It is only close observation, sire, and the commonest highwayman would do as much."

"The whole scene is before me from the manner in which you relate it."

"I have, in fact, reconstructed it in my own mind, with merely a few alterations."

"And now," said the king, "let us return to the dismounted cavalier. You were saying that he had walked toward his adversary while the latter was loading his pistol."

"Yes; but at the very moment he himself was taking aim, the other fired."

"Oh!" said the king; "and the shot?"

"The shot told terribly, sire; the dismounted cavalier fell upon his face, after having staggered forward three or four paces."

"Where was he hit?"

"In two places; in the first place, in his right hand, and then, by the same bullet, in his chest."

"But how could you ascertain that?" inquired the king, full of admiration.

"By a very simple means; the butt-end of the pistol was covered with blood, and the trace of the bullet could be observed with fragments of a broken ring. The wounded man, in all probability, had the ring-finger and the little finger carried off."

"As far as the hand goes, I have nothing to say; but the chest?"

"Sire, there were two small pools of blood, at a distance of about two feet and a half from each other. At one of these pools of blood the grass was torn up by the clinched hand; at the other, the grass was simply pressed down by the weight of the body."

"Poor De Guiche!" exclaimed the king.

"Ah! it was Monsieur de Guiche, then?" said the musketeer very quietly. "I suspected it, but did not venture to mention it to your majesty."

"And what made you suspect it?"

"I recognized the De Grammont arms upon the holsters of the dead horse."

"And you think he is seriously wounded?"

"Very seriously; since he fell immediately, and remained a long time in the same place; however, he was able to walk, as he left the spot supported by two friends."

"You met him returning, then?"

"No; but I observed the footprints of three men; the one on the right and the one on the left walked freely and easily, but the one in the middle dragged his feet as he walked; besides, he left traces of blood at every step he took."

"Now, monsieur, since you saw the combat so distinctly that not a single detail seems to have escaped you, tell me something about De Guiche's adversary?"

"Oh, sire, I do not know him."

"And yet you see everything very clearly."

"Yes, sire, I see everything; but I do not tell all I see; and, since the poor devil has escaped, your majesty will permit me to say that I do not intend to denounce him."

"And yet he is guilty, since he has fought a duel, monsieur."

"Not guilty in my eyes, sire," said D'Artagnan coldly.

"Monsieur!" exclaimed the king, "are you aware of what you are saying?"

"Perfectly, sire; but according to my notions, a man who fights a duel is a brave man; such, at least, is my own opinion; but your majesty may have another; that is very natural—you are the master here."

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, I ordered you, however——"

D'Artagnan interrupted the king by a respectful gesture.

"You ordered me, sire, to gather what particulars I could, respecting a hostile meeting that had taken place; those particulars you have. If you order me to arrest Monsieur de Guiche's adversary, I will do so; but do not order me to denounce him to you, for in that case I will not obey."

"Very well. Arrest him, then."

"Give me his name, sire."

The king stamped his foot angrily; but after a moment's reflection, he said:

"You are right—ten times, twenty times, a hundred times right."

"That is my opinion, sire; I am happy that, this time, it accords with your majesty's."

"One word more. Who assisted De Guiche?"

"I do not know, sire."

"But you speak of two men. There was a person present, then, as second?"

"There was no second, sire. Nay, more than that, when Monsieur de Guiche fell his adversary fled, without giving him any assistance."

"The miserable coward!" exclaimed the king.

"The consequence of your ordinances, sire. If a man has fought well and fairly, and has already escaped one chance of death, he naturally wishes to escape a second. Monsieur de Botteville cannot be forgotten very easily."

"And so, men turn cowards."

"No; they become prudent."

"And he has fled, then, you say?"

"Yes; and as fast as his horse could possibly carry him."

"In what direction?"

"In the direction of the château."

"Well, and after?"

"Afterward, as I have had the honor of telling your majesty, two men on foot arrived, who carried Monsieur de Guiche back with them."

"What proof have you that these men arrived after the combat?"

"A very evident proof, sire; at the moment the encounter took place the rain had just ceased, the ground had not had time to imbibe the moisture, and had, consequently, become damp; the footsteps sank in the ground; but while Monsieur de Guiche was lying there in a fainting condition, the ground became firm again, and the footsteps made a less sensible impression."

Louis clapped his hands together in sign of admiration.

"Monsieur d'Artagnan," he said, "you are positively the cleverest man in my kindgom."

"The very thing that Monsieur de Richelieu thought, and Monsieur de Mazarin said, sire."

"And now, it remains for us to see if your sagacity is in fault."

"Oh, sire, a man may be mistaken; *errare humanum est,*" said the musketeer philosophically.

"In that case, you are not human, Monsieur d'Artagnan, for I believe you never are mistaken."

"Your majesty said that we were going to see whether such was the case or not."

"Yes."

"In what way, may I venture to ask?"

"I have sent for Monsieur de Manicamp, and Monsieur de Manicamp is coming."

"And Monsieur de Manicamp knows the secret?"

"De Guiche has no secrets from Monsieur de Manicamp."

D'Artagnan shook his head.

"No one was present at the combat, I repeat; and unless Monsieur de Manicamp was one of the two men who brought him back——"

"Hush!" said the king; "he is coming. Remain there, and listen attentively."

"Very good, sire."

And, at the same moment, Manicamp and St. Aignan appeared at the threshold of the door.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE ENCOUNTER.

THE king with his hand made, first to the musketeer and then to St. Aignan, an imperious and significant gesture, as much as to say, "On your lives, not a word." D'Artagnan withdrew, like a soldier, into a corner of the room; St. Aignan, in his character of favorite, leaned over the back of the king's chair. Manicamp, with his right foot properly advanced, a smile upon his lips, and his white and well-formed hands gracefully disposed, advanced to make his reverence to the king, who returned the salutation by a bow.

"Good-evening, Monsieur de Manicamp," he said.

"Your majesty did me the honor to send for me," said Manicamp.

"Yes, in order to learn from you all the details of the unfortunate accident which has befallen the Comte de Guiche."

"Oh, sire, it is very grievous, indeed!"

"You were there?"

"Not precisely so, sire."

"But you arrived on the scene where the accident occurred a few minutes after it took place?"

"I did so, sire; about half an hour afterward."

"And where did the accident happen?"

"I believe, sire, the place is called the Rond-point du Bois-Rochin."

"Oh! the rendezvous of the hunt?"

"The very spot, sire."

"Very good; tell me what details you are acquainted with respecting this unhappy affair, Monsieur de Manicamp."

"Perhaps your majesty has already been informed of them, and I fear to fatigue you by useless repetitions."

"No, do not be afraid of that."

Manicamp looked all round him; he only saw D'Artagnan leaning with his back against the wainscot—D'Artagnan, calm, kind, and good-natured as usual—and St. Aignan, whom he had accompanied, and who still leaned over the king's armchair, with an expression of countenance equally full of good feeling. He determined, therefore, to speak out.

"Your majesty is perfectly aware," he said, "that accidents are very frequent in hunting."

"In hunting, do you say?"

"I mean, sire, when an animal is brought to bay."

"Ah! ah!" said the king, "it was when the animal was brought to bay, then, that the accident happened?"

"Alas! sire, unhappily, it was so."

The king paused for a moment before he said:

"What animal was being hunted?"

"A wild boar, sire."

"And what could possibly have possessed De Guiche to go to a wild-boar hunt by himself; that is but a clownish idea of sport, and only fit for that class of people who, unlike the Maréchal de Grammont, have no dogs and huntsmen to hunt as gentlemen should do."

Manicamp shrugged his shoulders.

"Youth is very rash," he said sententiously.

"Well, go on," said the king.

"At all events," continued Manicamp, not venturing to be too precipitate and hasty, and letting his words fall very slowly one by one, "at all events, sire, poor De Guiche went hunting—quite alone."

"Quite alone, indeed! What a sportsman! And is not Monsieur de Guiche aware that the wild boar always stands at bay?"

"That is the very thing that really happened, sire."

"He had some idea, then, of the beast being there?"

"Yes, sire; some peasants had seen it among their potatoes."

"And what kind of animal was it?"

"A short, thick beast."

"You may as well tell me, monsieur, that De Guiche had some idea of committing suicide; for I have seen him hunt,

and he is an active and vigorous hunter. Whenever he fires at an animal brought to bay and held in check by the dogs, he takes every possible precaution, and yet he fires with a carbine, and on this occasion he seems to have faced the boar with pistols only."

Manicamp started.

"A costly pair of pistols, excellent weapons to fight a duel with a man, and not with a wild boar. What absurdity!"

"There are some things, sire, which are difficult of explanation."

"You are quite right, and the event which we are now discussing is one of those things. Go on."

During the recital, St. Aignan, who had probably made a sign to Manicamp to be careful what he was about, found that the king's glance was constantly fixed upon himself, so that it was utterly impossible to communicate with Manicamp in any way. As for D'Artagnan, the statue of Silence at Athens was far more noisy and far more expressive than he. Manicamp, therefore, was obliged to continue in the same way he had begun, and so contrived to get more and more entangled in his explanation.

"Sire," he said, "this is probably how the affair happened. Guiche was waiting to receive the boar as it rushed toward him."

"On foot or on horseback?" inquired the king.

"On horseback. He fired upon the brute and missed his aim, and then it dashed upon him."

"And the horse was killed?"

"Ah, your majesty knows that, then!"

"I have been told that a horse has been found lying dead in the crossroads of the Bois-Rochin, and I presumed it was De Guiche's horse."

"Perfectly true, sire; it was his."

"Well, so much for the horse, and now for De Guiche?"

"De Guiche, once down, was attacked and worried by the wild boar, and wounded in the hand and in the chest."

"It is a horrible accident, but it must be admitted it was De Guiche's own fault. How could he possibly have gone to hunt such an animal merely armed with pistols; he must have forgotten the fable of Adonis?"

Manicamp rubbed his ear in seeming perplexity.

"Very true," he said; "it was very imprudent."

"Can you explain it, Monsieur Manicamp?"

"Sire, what is written, is written."

"Ah! you are a fatalist."

Manicamp looked very uncomfortable and ill at ease.

"I am angry with you, Monsieur Manicamp," continued the king.

"With me, sire?"

"Yes. How was it that you, who are De Guiche's intimate friend, and who know that he is subject to such acts of folly, did not stop him in time?"

Manicamp hardly knew what to do; the tone in which the king spoke was not exactly that of a credulous man. On the other hand, the tone did not indicate any particular severity, nor did he seem to care very much about the cross-examination. There was more of raillery in it than of menace.

"And you say, then," continued the king, "that it was positively De Guiche's horse that was found dead?"

"Quite positive, sire."

"Did that astonish you?"

"No, sire; for your majesty will remember that at the last hunt Monsieur de St. Maure had a horse killed under him, and in the same way."

"Yes, but that one was ripped open."

"Of course, sire."

"Had De Guiche's horse been ripped open like Monsieur de St. Maure's horse, that would not have astonished me indeed."

Manicamp opened his eyes very wide.

"Am I mistaken?" resumed the king. "Was it not in the temple that De Guiche's horse was struck? You must admit, Monsieur de Manicamp, that that is a very singular wound."

"You are aware, sire, that the horse is a very intelligent animal, and he endeavored to defend himself."

"But a horse defends himself with his hind feet, and not with his head."

"In that case, the terrified horse may have slipped or fallen down," said Manicamp, "and the boar, you understand, sire, the boar——"

"Oh! I understand that perfectly, as far as the horse is concerned; but how about the rider?"

"Well, that, too, is simple enough; the boar left the horse and attacked the rider; and, as I have already had the honor of informing your majesty, shattered De Guiche's hand at the very moment he was about to discharge his second pistol at him, and then, with a blow of his tusk, made that terrible hole in his chest."

"Nothing can possibly be more likely; really, Monsieur de Manicamp, you are wrong in placing so little confidence in your own eloquence, and you can tell a story most admirably."

"Your majesty is exceedingly kind," said Manicamp, saluting him in the most embarrassed manner.

"From this day henceforth, I will prohibit any gentleman attached to my court going to a similar encounter. Really, one might just as well permit dueling."

Manicamp started, and moved as if he were about to withdraw.

"Is your majesty satisfied?" he inquired.

"Delighted; but do not withdraw yet, Monsieur de Manicamp," said Louis; "I have something to say to you."

"Well, well!" thought D'Artagnan, "there is another who is not up to our mark;" and he uttered a sigh which might signify, "Oh! the men of our stamp, where are they now?"

At this moment an usher lifted up the curtain before the door, and announced the king's physician.

"Ah!" exclaimed Louis, "here comes Monsieur Valot, who has just been to see Monsieur de Guiche. We shall now hear news of the wounded man."

Manicamp felt more uncomfortable than ever.

"In this way, at least," added the king, "our conscience will be quite clear."

And he looked at D'Artagnan, who did not seem in the slightest degree discomposed.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PHYSICIAN.

M. Valot entered. The position of the different persons present was precisely the same; the king was seated, St. Aignan still leaning over the back of his armchair, D'Artagnan with his back against the wall, and Manicamp still standing.

"Well, Monsieur Valot," said the king, "have you obeyed my directions?"

"With the greatest alacrity, sire."

"You went to the doctor's house in Fontainebleau?"

"Yes, sire."

"And you found Monsieur de Guiche there?"

"I did, sire."

"What state was he in? Speak unreservedly."

"In a very sad state, indeed, sire."

"The wild boar did not quite devour him, however?"

"Devour whom?"

"De Guiche."

"What wild boar?"

"The boar that wounded him."

"Monsieur de Guiche wounded by a boar?"

"So it is said, at least."

"By a poacher, rather, or by a jealous husband, or an ill-used lover, who, in order to be revenged, fired upon him."

"What is that you say, Monsieur Valot? Were not Monsieur de Guiche's wounds produced by defending himself against a wild boar?"

"Monsieur de Guiche's wounds were produced by a pistol-bullet which broke his ring-finger and the little finger of the right hand, and afterward buried itself in the intercostal muscles of the chest."

"A bullet? Are you sure Monsieur de Guiche has been wounded by a bullet?" exclaimed the king, pretending to look much surprised.

"Indeed, I am, sire; so sure, in fact, that here it is."

And he presented to the king a half-flattened bullet, which the king looked at, but did not touch.

"Did he have that in his chest, poor fellow?" he asked.

"Not precisely. The ball did not penetrate, but was flattened, as you see, either upon the trigger of the pistol or upon the right side of the breast-bone."

"Good heavens!" said the king seriously, "you said nothing to me about this, Monsieur de Manicamp."

"Sire——"

"What does all this mean, then, this invention about hunting a wild boar at nightfall? Come, speak, monsieur."

"Sire——"

"It seems, then, that you are right," said the king, turning round toward his captain of musketeers, "and that a duel actually took place."

The king possessed, to a greater extent than any one else, the faculty enjoyed by the great in power or position, of compromising and dividing those beneath him. Manicamp darted a look full of reproaches at the musketeer. D'Artagnan understood the look at once, and not wishing to remain beneath the weight of such an accusation, advanced a step forward, and said:

"Sire, your majesty commanded me to go and explore the place where the crossroads meet in the Bois-Rochin, and to report to you, according to my own ideas, what had taken place there. I submitted my observations to you, but without denouncing any one. It was your majesty yourself who was the first to name the Comte de Guiche."

"Well, monsieur, well," said the king haughtily; "you have done your duty, and I am satisfied with you. But you, Monsieur de Manicamp, have failed in yours, for you have told me a falsehood."

"A falsehood, sire? The expression is a hard one."

"Find another instead, then."

"Sire, I will not attempt to do so. I have already been unfortunate enough to displease your majesty, and it will, in every respect, be far better for me to accept most humbly any reproaches you may think proper to address to me."

"You are right, monsieur; whoever conceals the truth from me risks my displeasure."

"Sometimes, sire, one is ignorant of the truth."

"No further falsehood, monsieur, or I double the punishment."

Manicamp bowed and turned pale. D'Artagnan again made another step forward, determined to interfere, if the still increasing anger of the king attained certain limits.

"You see, monsieur," continued the king, "that it is useless to deny the thing any longer. Monsieur de Guiche has fought a duel."

"I do not deny it, sire, and it would have been generous in your majesty not to have forced me to tell a falsehood."

"Forced? Who forced you?"

"Sire, Monsieur de Guiche is my friend. Your majesty has forbidden duels under pain of death. A falsehood might save my friend's life, and I told it."

"Good!" murmured D'Artagnan, "an excellent fellow, upon my word!"

"Instead of telling a falsehood, monsieur, you should have prevented him from fighting," said the king.

"Oh, sire, your majesty, who is the most accomplished gentleman in France, knows quite as well as any of us other gentlemen that we have never considered Monsieur de Botteville dishonored for having suffered death on the Place de Grève. That which does, in truth, dishonor a man is to avoid meeting his enemy, and not to avoid meeting his executioner."

"Well, monsieur, that may be so," said Louis XIV.; "I am very desirous of suggesting a means of your repairing all."

"If it be a means of which a gentleman may avail himself, I shall most eagerly do so."

"The name of Monsieur de Guiche's adversary?"

"Oh, oh!" murmured D'Artagnan, "are we going to take Louis XIII. as a model?"

"Sire!" said Manicamp, with an accent of reproach.

"You will not name him, it appears, then?" said the king.

"Sire, I do not know him."

"Bravo!" murmured D'Artagnan.

"Monsieur de Manicamp, hand your sword to the captain."

Manicamp bowed very gracefully, unbuckled his sword, smiling as he did so, and handed it for the musketeer to take. But St. Aignan advanced hurriedly between him and D'Artagnan.

"Sire," he said, "will your majesty permit me to say a word?"

"Do so," said the king, delighted perhaps at the bottom of his heart for some one to step between him and the wrath which he felt had carried him too far.

"Manicamp, you are a brave man, and the king will appreciate your conduct; but to wish to serve your friends too well, is to destroy them. Manicamp, you know the name the king asks you for?"

"It is perfectly true—I do know it."

"You will give it up, then?"

"If I felt I ought to have mentioned it, I should have already done so."

"Then I will tell it, for I am not so extremely sensitive on such points of honor as you are.

"You are at liberty to do so, but it seems to me, however——"

"Oh! a truce to magnanimity; I will not permit you to go to the Bastile in that way. Do you speak, or I will."

Manicamp was keen-witted enough, and perfectly understood that he had done quite sufficient to produce a good opinion of his conduct; it was now only a question of persevering in such a manner as to regain the good graces of the king.

"Speak, monsieur," he said to St. Aignan; "I have on my own behalf done all that my conscience told me to do, and it must have been very importunate," he added, turning toward the king, "since its mandates led me to disobey your majesty's commands; but your majesty will forgive me, I hope, when you learn that I was anxious to preserve the honor of a lady."

"Of a lady?" said the king, with some uneasiness.

"Yes, sire."

"A lady was the cause of this duel?"

Manicamp bowed.

"If the position of the lady in question warrants it," he said, "I shall not complain of your having acted with so much circumspection; on the contrary, indeed."

"Sire, everything which concerns your majesty's household, or the household of your majesty's brother, is of importance in my eyes."

"In my brother's household," repeated Louis XIV., with a slight hesitation. "The cause of the duel was a lady belonging to my brother's household, do you say?"

"Or to madame's."

"Ah! to madame's?"

"Yes, sire."

"Well—and this lady?"

"Is one of the maids of honor of Her Royal Highness Madame la Duchesse d'Orléans."

"For whom Monsieur de Guiche fought—do you say?"

"Yes, sire; and this time I tell no falsehood."

Louis seemed restless and anxious.

"Gentlemen," he said, turning toward the spectators of this scene, "will you have the goodness to retire for a moment? I wish to be alone with Monsieur de Manicamp; I know he has some very important communication to make for his own justification, and which he will not venture to do before witnesses. Put up your sword, Monsieur de Manicamp."

Manicamp returned his sword to his belt.

"The fellow, decidedly, has his wits about him," murmured the musketeer, taking St. Aignan by the arm, and withdrawing with him.

"He will get out of it," said the latter, in D'Artagnan's ear.

"And with honor, too, comte."

Manicamp cast a glance of recognition at St. Aignan and the captain, which passed unnoticed by the king.

"Come, come," said D'Artagnan, as he left the room, "I had an indifferent opinion of the new generation. Well, I was mistaken, after all, and there is some good in them, I perceive."

Valot preceded the favorite and the captain, leaving the king and Manicamp alone in the cabinet.

CHAPTER XIX.

WHEREIN D'ARTAGNAN PERCEIVES THAT IT WAS HE WHO WAS MISTAKEN AND MANICAMP WHO WAS RIGHT.

THE king, determined to be satisfied that no one was listening, went himself to the door, and then returned precipitately and placed himself opposite to Manicamp.

"And now we are alone, Monsieur de Manicamp, explain yourself."

"With the greatest frankness sire," replied the young man.

"And, in the first place, pray understand," added the king, "that there is nothing to which I personally attach a greater importance than the honor of any lady."

"That is the very reason, sire, why I endeavored to study your delicacy of sentiment and feeling."

"Yes, I understand it all now. You say that it was one of the maids of honor of my sister-in-law who was the subject of dispute, and that the person in question, De Guiche's adversary, the man, in point of fact, whom you will not name——"

"But whom Monsieur de St. Aignan will name, sire."

"Yes, you say, however, that this man has insulted some one belonging to the household of madame."

"Yes, sire; Mademoiselle de la Valliere."

"Ah!" said the king, as if he had expected the name, and yet as if its announcement had caused him a sudden pang, "ah! it was Mademoiselle de la Valliere who was insulted?"

"I do not say precisely that she was insulted, sire."

"But, at all events——"

"I merely say that she was spoken of in terms far from respectful."

"A man dares to speak in disrespectful terms of Mademoiselle de la Valliere, and yet you refuse to tell me the name of the insulter?"

"Sire, I thought it was quite understood that your majesty had abandoned the idea of making me denounce him."

"Perfectly true, monsieur," returned the king, controlling his anger; "besides, I shall always know in sufficient time the name of the man whom I shall feel it my duty to punish."

Manicamp perceived that they had returned to the question again. As for the king, he saw he had allowed himself

to be hurried away a little too far, and he therefore continued:

"And I will punish him—not because there is any question of Mademoiselle de la Valliere, although I esteem her very highly—but because a lady was the object of the quarrel. And I intend that ladies shall be respected at my court, and that quarrels shall be put a stop to altogether."

Manicamp bowed.

"And now, Monsieur de Manicamp," continued the king, "what was said about Mademoiselle de la Valliere?"

"Cannot your majesty guess?"

"I?"

"Your majesty can imagine the character of the jests in which young men permit themselves to indulge."

"They very probably said that she was in love with some one?" the king ventured to remark.

"Probably so."

"But Mademoiselle de la Valliere has a perfect right to love any one she pleases," said the king.

"That is the very point De Guiche maintained."

"And on account of which he fought, do you mean?"

"Yes, sire, the very sole cause."

The king colored.

"And you do not know anything more, then?"

"In what respect, sire?"

"In the very interesting respect which you are now referring to."

"What does your majesty wish to know?"

"Why, the name of the man with whom La Valliere is in love, and whom De Guiche's adversary disputed her right to love."

"Sire, I know nothing—I have heard nothing—and have learned nothing, even accidentally; but De Guiche is a noble-hearted fellow, and if, momentarily, he substituted himself in the place or stead of La Valliere's protector, it was because that protector was himself of too exalted a position to undertake her defense."

These words were more than transparent; they made the king blush, but this time with pleasure. He struck Manicamp gently on the shoulder.

"Well, well, Monsieur de Manicamp, you are not only a ready, witty fellow, but a brave gentleman besides, and your friend De Guiche is a paladin quite after my own heart; you will express that to him from me."

"Your majesty forgives me, then?"

"Completely."

"And I am free?"

The king smiled, and held out his hand to Manicamp, which he took and kissed respectfully.

"And then," added the king, "you relate stories so charmingly."

"I, sire?"

"You told me, in the most admirable manner, the particulars of the accident which happened to De Guiche. I can see the wild boar rushing out of the wood—I can see the horse fall down, and the boar rush from the horse to the rider. You do not simply relate a story well, but you positively paint its incidents."

"Sire, I think your majesty deigns to laugh at my expense," said Manicamp.

"On the contrary," said Louis seriously, "I have so little intention of laughing, Monsieur de Manicamp, that I wish you to relate this adventure to every one."

"The adventure of the hunt?"

"Yes; in the same manner you told it to me, without changing a single word—you understand?"

"Perfectly, sire.

"And you will relate it, then?"

"Without losing a minute."

"Very well; and now summon Monsieur d'Artagnan; I hope you are no longer afraid of him."

"Oh, sire, from the very moment I am sure of your majesty's kind dispositions, I no longer fear anything!"

"Call him, then," said the king.

Manicamp opened the door, and said:

"Gentlemen, the king wishes you to return."

D'Artagnan, St. Aignan, and Valot entered.

"Gentlemen," said the king, "I summoned you for the purpose of saying that Monsieur de Manicamp's explanation has entirely satisfied me."

D'Artagnan glanced at Valot and St. Aignan, as much as to say:

"Well, did I not tell you so?"

The king led Manicamp to the door, and then, in a low tone of voice, said:

"See that Monsieur de Guiche takes good care of himself, and particularly that he recovers as soon as possible; I am very desirous of thanking him in the name of every lady, but let him take special care that he does not begin again."

"Were he to die a hundred times, sire, he would begin

again, if your majesty's honor were in any way called in question."

This remark was direct enough. But we have already said that the incense of flattery was very pleasing to the king, and, provided he received it, he was not very particular as to its quality.

"Very well, very well," he said, as he dismissed Manicamp, "I will see De Guiche myself, and make him listen to reason."

And as Manicamp left the apartment, the king turned round toward the three spectators of this scene, and said:

"Tell me, Monsieur d'Artagnan, how does it happen that your sight is so imperfect?—you, whose eyes are generally so very good."

"My sight bad, sire?"

"Certainly."

"It must be the case, since your majesty says so; but in what respect, may I ask?"

"Why, with regard to what occurred in the Bois-Rochin."

"Ah! ah!"

"Certainly. You pretend to have seen the tracks of two horses, to have detected the footprints of two men, and have described the particulars of an engagement, which you assert took place. Nothing of the sort occurred; pure illusion on your part."

"Ah! ah!" said D'Artagnan.

"Exactly the same thing with the galloping to and fro of the horses, and the other indications of a struggle. It was the struggle of De Guiche against the wild boar, and absolutely nothing else; only the struggle was a long and a terrible one, it seems."

"Ah! ah!" continued D'Artagnan.

"And when I think that I almost believed it for a moment; but then you spoke with such confidence."

"I admit, sire, that I must have been very short-sighted," said D'Artagnan, with a readiness of humor which delighted the king.

"You do admit, then?"

"Admit it, sire? Most assuredly I do."

"So that now you see the thing——"

"In quite a different light to what I saw it half an hour ago."

"And to what, then, do you attribute this difference in your opinion?"

"Oh! a very simple thing, sire; half an hour ago I re-

turned from the Bois-Rochin, where I had nothing to light me but a stupid stable-lantern——"

"While now?"

"While now I have all the wax-lights of your cabinet, and more than that, your majesty's own eyes, which illuminate everything, like the blazing sun at noonday."

The king began to laugh, and St. Aignan broke out into convulsions of merriment.

"It is precisely like Monsieur Valot," said D'Artagnan, resuming the conversation where the king had left off; "he has been imagining all along that not only was Monsieur de Guiche wounded by a bullet, but still more, that he extracted it, even, from his chest."

"Upon my word," said Valot, "I assure you——"

"Now, did you not believe that?" continued D'Artagnan.

"Yes," said Valot; "not only did I believe it, but at this very moment I would swear it."

"Well, my dear doctor, you have dreamed it."

"I have dreamed it?"

"Monsieur de Guiche's wound—a mere dream; the bullet, a dream. So, take my advice and say no more about it."

"Well said," returned the king. "Monsieur d'Artagnan's advice is very good. Do not speak of your dream to any one, Monsieur Valot, and, upon the word of a gentleman, you will have no occasion to repent it. Good-evening, gentlemen; a very sad affair, indeed, is a wild-boar hunt!"

"A very serious thing, indeed," repeated D'Artagnan, in a loud voice, "is a wild-boar hunt!" and he repeated it in every room through which he passed, and left the château, taking Valot with him.

"And now we are alone," said the king to St. Aignan, "what is the name of De Guiche's adversary?"

St. Aignan looked at the king.

"Oh! do not hesitate," said the king; "you know that I must forgive."

"De Wardes," said St. Aignan.

"Very good," said Louis XIV.; and then, hastily retiring to his own room, added to himself, "To forgive is not to forget."

CHAPTER XX.

SHOWING THE ADVANTAGE OF HAVING TWO STRINGS TO ONE'S BOW.

MANICAMP quitted the king's apartment, delighted at having succeeded so well, when, just as he reached the bottom of the staircase, and was about passing before a doorway, he felt that some one suddenly pulled him by the sleeve. He turned round and recognized Montalais, who was waiting for him in the passage, and who, in a very mysterious manner, with her body bent forward, and in a low tone of voice, said to him:

"Follow me, monsieur, and without any delay, if you please."

"Where to, mademoiselle?" inquired Manicamp.

"In the first place, a true knight would not have asked such a question, but would have followed me without requiring any explanation."

"Well, mademoiselle, I am quite ready to conduct myself as a true knight."

"No; it is too late, and you cannot take the credit of it. We are going to madame's apartment, so come at once."

"Ah! ah!" said Manicamp. "Lead on, then."

And he followed Montalais, who ran before him as light as Galatea.

"This time," said Manicamp, as he followed his guide, "I do not think that stories about hunting expeditions would be acceptable. We will try, however, and if need be —why, if there should be any occasion for it, we must try something else."

Montalais still ran on.

"How fatiguing it is," thought Manicamp, "to have need of one's head and legs at the same time."

At last, however, they arrived. Madame had just finished undressing, and was in a most elegant *déshabille,* but it must be understood that she had changed her dress before she had any idea of being subjected to the emotions which agitated her. She was waiting with the most restless impatience, and Montalais and Manicamp found her standing near the door. At the sound of their approaching footsteps madame came forward to meet them.

"Ah!" she said, "at last!"

"Here is Monsieur Manicamp," replied Montalais.

Manicamp bowed with the greatest respect; madame

signed to Montalais to withdraw, and she immediately obeyed. Madame followed her with her eyes, in silence, until the door closed behind her, and then, turning toward Manicamp, said:

"What is the matter?—and is it true, as I am told, Monsieur de Manicamp, that some one is lying wounded in the château?"

"Yes, madame, unfortunately so—Monsieur de Guiche."

"Yes, Monsieur de Guiche," repeated the princess. "I had, in fact, heard it rumored, but not confirmed. And so, in perfect truth, it is Monsieur de Guiche who has been so unfortunate?"

"Monsieur de Guiche himself, madame."

"Are you aware, Monsieur de Manicamp," said the princess hastily, "that the king has the strongest antipathy to duels?"

"Perfectly so, madame; but a duel with a wild beast is not amenable to his majesty."

"Oh, you will not insult me by supposing that I should credit the absurd fable which has been reported, with what object I cannot tell, respecting Monsieur de Guiche having been wounded by a wild boar. No, no, monsieur; the real truth is known, and, in addition to the inconvenience of his wound, Monsieur de Guiche runs the risk of losing his liberty."

"Alas! madame, I am well aware of that, but what is to be done?"

"You have seen the king?"

"Yes, madame."

"What did you say to him?"

"I told him how Monsieur de Guiche had been to the chase, and how a wild boar had rushed forth out of the Bois-Rochin; how Monsieur de Guiche fired at it, and how, in fact, the furious brute dashed at De Guiche, killed his horse, and grievously wounded himself."

"And the king believed that?"

"Perfectly."

"Oh, you surprise me, Monsieur de Manicamp; you surprise me very much."

And madame walked up and down the room, casting a searching look from time to time at Manicamp, who remained motionless and impassible in the same place. At last she stopped.

"And yet," she said, "every one here seems united in giving another cause for this wound."

"What cause, madame," said Manicamp, "may I be permitted, without indiscretion, to ask your highness?"

"You ask such a question! You, Monsieur de Guiche's intimate friend—his confidant, indeed!"

"Oh, madame, the intimate friend, yes; the confidant, no. De Guiche is a man who can keep his own secrets, who has some of his own certainly, but who never breathes a syllable about them. De Guiche is discretion itself, madame."

"Very well, then; those secrets which Monsieur de Guiche keeps so scrupulously, I shall have the pleasure of informing you of," said the princess almost spitefully; "for the king may possibly question you a second time, and if, on the second occasion, you were to repeat the same story to him, he possibly might not be very well satisfied with it."

"But, madame, I think your highness is mistaken with regard to the king. His majesty has been perfectly satisfied with me, I assure you."

"In that case, permit me to assure you, Monsieur de Manicamp, that only proves one thing, which is, that his majesty is very easily satisfied."

"I think your highness is mistaken in arriving at such an opinion; his majesty is well known not to be contented except with very good reasons."

"And do you suppose that he will thank you for your officious falsehood, when he will learn to-morrow that Monsieur de Guiche had, on behalf of his friend, Monsieur de Bragelonne, a quarrel which ended in a hostile meeting?"

"A quarrel on Monsieur de Bragelonne's account," said Manicamp, with the most innocent expression in the world; "what does your royal highness do me the honor to tell me?"

"What is there astonishing in that? Monsieur de Guiche is susceptible, irritable, and easily loses his temper."

"On the contrary, madame, I know Monsieur de Guiche to be very patient, and never susceptible or irritable except upon very good grounds."

"But is not friendship a just ground?" said the princess.

"Oh, certainly, madame; and particularly for a heart like his."

"Very good; you will not deny, I suppose, that Monsieur de Bragelonne is Monsieur de Guiche's friend?"

"A very great friend."

"Well, then, Monsieur de Guiche had taken Monsieur de Bragelonne's part, and as Monsieur de Bragelonne was absent and could not fight, he fought for him."

Manicamp began to smile, and moved his head and shoulders very slightly, as much as to say:

"Oh, if you will positively have it so——"

"But speak, at all events," said the princess, out of patience, "speak!"

"I?"

"Of course; it is quite clear you are not of my opinion, and that you have something to say."

"I have only one thing to say; madame."

"Name it."

"That I do not understand a single word of what you have just been telling me."

"What! you do not understand a single word about Monsieur de Guiche's quarrel with Monsieur de Wardes?" exclaimed the princess, almost out of temper.

Manicamp remained silent.

"A quarrel," she continued, "which arose out of a conversation scandalous in its tone and purport, and more or less well founded, respecting the virtue of a certain lady."

"Ah! of a certain lady—this is quite another thing," said Manicamp.

"You begin to understand, do you not?"

"Your highness will excuse me, but I dare not——"

"You dare not," said madame, exasperated; "very well, then, wait one moment, and I will dare."

"Madame, madame!" exclaimed Manicamp, as if in great dismay, "be careful of what you are going to say."

"It would seem, monsieur, that if I happened to be a man, you would challenge me, notwithstanding his majesty's edicts, as Monsieur de Guiche challenged Monsieur de Wardes; and that, too, on account of the virtue of Mademoiselle de la Valliere."

"Of Mademoiselle de la Valliere!" exclaimed Manicamp, starting backward, as if hers was the very last name he expected to hear pronounced.

"What makes you start in that manner, Monsieur de Manicamp?" said madame ironically; "do you mean to say you would be impertinent enough to suspect that young lady's honor?"

"Madame, in the whole course of this affair there has not been the slightest question of Mademoiselle de la Valliere's honor."

"What! when two men have almost blown each other's brains out on a woman's behalf, do you mean to say she has had nothing to do with the affair, and that her name has

not been called in question at all? I did not think you so good a courtier, Monsieur de Manicamp."

"Pray forgive me, madame," said the young man, "but we are very far from understanding each other. You do me the honor to speak one kind of language, while I am speaking altogether another."

"I beg your pardon, but I do not understand your meaning."

"Forgive me, then; but I fancied I understood your highness to remark that De Guiche and De Wardes had fought on Mademoiselle de la Valliere's account."

"Certainly."

"On account of Mademoiselle de la Valliere, I think you said?" repeated Manicamp.

"I do not say that Monsieur de Guiche personally took an interest in Mademoiselle de la Valliere, but I say that he did so as representing or acting on behalf of another."

"On behalf of another?"

"Come, do not always assume such a bewildered look. Does not every one here know that Monsieur de Bragelonne is affianced to Mademoiselle de la Valliere, and that before he went on the mission with which the king intrusted him, he charged his friend, Monsieur de Guiche, to watch over that interesting young lady."

"There is nothing more for me to say, then. Your highness is well informed."

"Of everything; so I beg you to understand that clearly."

Manicamp began to laugh, which almost exasperated the princess, who was not, as we know, of a very patient and enduring disposition.

"Madame," resumed the discreet Manicamp, saluting the princess, "let us bury this affair altogether in forgetfulness, for it will never be quite cleared up."

"Oh, as far as that goes, there is nothing more to do, and the information is complete. The king will learn that Monsieur de Guiche has taken up the cause of this little adventuress, who gives herself all the airs of a grand lady; he will learn that Monsieur de Bragelonne, having nominated his friend, Monsieur de Guiche, his guardian-in-ordinary of the garden of the Hesperides, the latter immediately fastened, as he was required to do, upon the Marquis de Wardes, who ventured to touch the golden apple. Moreover, you cannot pretend to deny, Monsieur de Manicamp —you who know everything so well—that the king, on his side, casts a longing eye upon this famous treasure, and

that he will bear no slight grudge against Monsieur de Guiche for constituting himself the defender of it. Are you sufficiently well informed now, or do you require anything further—if so, speak, monsieur?"

"No, madame; there is nothing more I wish to know."

"Learn, however—for you ought to know it, Monsieur de Manicamp—learn that his majesty's indignation will be followed by terrible consequences. In princes of a similar temperament to that of his majesty, the passion which jealousy causes sweeps down like a whirlwind."

"Which you will temper, madame."

"I!" exclaimed the princess, with a gesture of indescribable irony. "I? and by what title, may I ask?"

"Because you detect injustice, madame."

"And according to your account, then, it would be an injustice to prevent the king arranging his love affairs as he pleases."

"You will intercede, however, in Monsieur de Guiche's favor?"

"You are mad, monsieur," said the princess, in a haughty tone of voice.

"On the contrary, I am in the most perfect possession of my senses; and, I repeat, you will defend Monsieur de Guiche before the king."

"Why should I?"

"Because the cause of Monsieur de Guiche is your own, madame," said Manicamp, with all the ardor with which his eyes were kindled.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, madame, that, with respect to the defense which Monsieur de Guiche undertook in Monsieur de Bragelonne's absence, I am surprised that your highness has not detected a pretext in La Valliere's name having been brought forward."

"A pretext? But a pretext for what?" repeated the princess hesitatingly, for Manicamp's steady look had just revealed something of the truth to her.

"I trust, madame," said the young man, "I have said sufficient to induce your highness not to overwhelm before his majesty my poor friend, De Guiche, against whom all the malevolence of a party bitterly opposed to your own will now be directed."

"You mean, on the contrary, I suppose, that all those who have no great affection for Mademoiselle de la Valliere, and even, perhaps, a few of those who have some regard for her, will be angry with the comte?"

"Oh, madame! why will you push your obstinacy to such an extent, and refuse to open your ears and listen to the counsel of one whose devotion to you is unbounded? Must I expose myself to the risk of your displeasure—am I really to be called upon to name, contrary to my own wish, the person who was the real cause of this quarrel?"

"The person?" said madame, blushing.

"Must I?" continued Manicamp, "tell you how poor De Guiche became irritated, furious, exasperated beyond all control, at the different rumors which are circulating about this person? Must I, if you persist in this willful blindness, and if respect should continue to prevent me naming her—must I, I repeat, call to your recollection the various scenes which Monsieur had with the Duke of Buckingham, and the insinuations which were reported respecting the duke's exile? Must I remind you of the anxious care the comte always took in his efforts to please, to watch, to protect that person for whom alone he lives—for whom alone he breathes? Well, I will do so; and when I shall have made you recall all the particulars I refer to, you will perhaps understand how it happened that the comte, having lost all control over himself, and having been for some time past almost harassed to death by De Wardes, became, at the first disrespectful expression which the latter pronounced respecting the person in question, inflamed with passion, and panted only for an opportunity of revenging the affront."

The princess concealed her face with her hands.

"Monsieur, monsieur!" she exclaimed, "do you know what you are saying, and to whom you are speaking?"

"Therefore, madame," pursued Manicamp, as if he had not heard the exclamations of the princess, "nothing will astonish you any longer—neither the comte's ardor in seeking the quarrel nor his wonderful address in transferring it to a quarter foreign to your own personal interests. That latter circumstance was, indeed, a marvelous instance of tact and perfect coolness, and if the person in whose behalf the comte so fought and shed his blood does, in reality, owe some gratitude to the poor wounded sufferer it is not on account of the blood he has shed or for the agony he has suffered, but for the steps he has taken to preserve from comment or reflection an honor which is more precious to him than his own."

"Oh!" cried madame as if she had been alone, "is it possible the quarrel was on my account?"

Manicamp felt he could now breathe for a moment and gallantly had he won the right to do so. Madame on her side remained for some time plunged in a painful reverie. Her agitation could be seen by her quick respiration, by her languishing looks, by the frequency with which she pressed her hand upon her heart. But in her coquetry was not so much a passive quality as, on the contrary, a fire which sought for fuel to maintain itself, and which found what it required.

"If it be as you assert," she said, "the comte will have obliged two persons at the same time; for Monsieur de Bragelonne also owes a deep debt of gratitude to Monsieur de Guiche—and with far greater reason indeed, because everywhere, and on every occasion, Mademoiselle de la Valliere will be regarded as having been defended by this generous champion."

Manicamp perceived that there still remained some lingering doubt in the princess' heart.

"A truly admirable service, indeed," he said, "is the one he has rendered to Mademoiselle de la Valliere! A truly admirable service to Monsieur de Bragelonne! The duel has created a sensation which, in some respects, casts a dishonorable suspicion upon that young girl; a sensation, indeed, which will imbroil her with the vicomte. The consequence is, that De Wardes' pistol-bullet has had three results instead of one; it destroys at the same time the honor of a woman, the happiness of a man, and, perhaps, it has wounded to death one of the best gentlemen in France. Oh, madame! your logic is cold and calculating; it always condemns—it never absolves."

Manicamp's concluding words scattered to the winds the last doubt which lingered, not in madame's heart, but in her head. She was no longer a princess full of scruples, nor a woman with her ever-returning suspicions, but one whose heart had just felt the mortal chill of a wound.

"Wounded to death!" she murmured, in a faltering voice, "oh, Monsieur de Manicamp! did you not say wounded to death?"

Manicamp returned no other answer than a deep sigh.

"And so you said that the comte is dangerously wounded?" continued the princess.

"Yes, madame; one of his hands is shattered, and he has a bullet lodged in his breast."

"Gracious heavens!" resumed the princess, with a feverish excitement, "this is horrible, Monsieur de Manicamp! a

hand shattered, do you say, and a bullet in his breast? And that coward! that wretch! that assassin, De Wardes, who did it!"

Manicamp seemed overcome by a violent emotion. He had, in fact, displayed no little energy in the latter part of his speech. As for madame, she entirely threw aside all regard for the formal observances of propriety which society imposes; for when, with her, passion spoke in accents either of anger or sympathy, nothing could any longer restrain her impulses. Madame approached Manicamp, who had sunk down upon a seat, as if his grief were a sufficiently powerful excuse for his infraction of one of the laws of etiquette. "Monsieur," she said, seizing him by the hand, "be frank with me."

Manicamp looked up.

"Is Monsieur de Guiche in danger of death?"

"Doubly so, madame," he replied; "in the first place, on account of the hemorrhage which has taken place, an artery having been injured in the hand; and next, in consequence of the wound in his breast, which may, the doctor is afraid of it at least, have injured some vital part."

"He may die, then?"

"Die, yes, madame; and without even having had the consolation of knowing that you have been told of his devotion."

"You will tell him."

"I?"

"Yes; are you not his friend?"

"I? oh, no, madame; I will only tell Monsieur de Guiche —if, indeed, he is still in a condition to hear me—I will only tell him what I have seen; that is, your cruelty for him."

"Oh, monsieur, you will not be guilty of such barbarity!"

"Indeed, madame, I shall speak the truth, for nature is very energetic in a man of his age. The physicians are clever men, and if, by chance, the poor comte should survive his wound, I should not wish him to die of a wound of the heart, after having escaped that of the body." And Manicamp rose, and with an expression of profound respect, seemed to be desirous of taking leave.

"At least, monsieur," said madame, stopping him with almost a suppliant air, "you will be kind enough to tell me in what state your wounded friend is, and who is the physician who attends him?"

"As regards the state he is in, madame, he is seriously

ill; his physician is Monsieur Valot, his majesty's private medical attendant. Monsieur Valot is moreover assisted by a professional friend, to whose house Monsieur de Guiche has been carried."

"What! he is not in the château?" said madame.

"Alas, madame! the poor fellow was so ill that he could not even be conveyed thither."

"Give me the address, monsieur," said the princess hurriedly; "I will send to inquire after him."

"Rue du Feurre; a brick-built house, with white outside blinds. The doctor's name is on the door."

"You are returning to your wounded friend, Monsieur de Manicamp?"

"Yes, madame."

"You will be able, then, to do me a service."

"I am at your highness' orders."

"Do what you intended to do; return to Monsieur de Guiche, send away all those whom you may find there, and have the kindness yourself to go away, too."

"Madame——"

"Let us waste no time in useless explanations. Accept the fact as I present it to you; see nothing in it beyond what is really there, and ask nothing further than what I tell you. I am going to send one of my ladies, perhaps two, because it is now getting late; I do not wish them to see you, or rather I do not wish you to see them. These are scruples which you can understand—you particularly, Monsieur de Manicamp, who seem to be capable of divining everything."

"Oh, madame, perfectly; I can even do better still, I will precede, or rather, walk in advance of your attendants; it will, at the same time, be the means of showing them the way more accurately, and of protecting them, if it happened any occasion might occur, though there is no probability of their needing protection."

"And by this means, then, they would be sure of entering without any difficulty, would they not?"

"Certainly, madame; for as I should be the first to pass, I should remove any difficulties which might chance to be in the way."

"Very well; go, go, Monsieur de Manicamp, and wait at the bottom of the staircase."

"I go at once, madame."

"Stay." Manicamp paused. "When you hear the footsteps of two women descending the stairs, go out, and,

without once turning round, take the road which leads to where the poor comte is lying."

"But if, by any mischance, two other persons were to descend, and I were to be mistaken?"

"You will hear one of the two clap her hands together very softly. So go."

Manicamp turned round, bowed once more, and left the room, his heart overflowing with joy. In fact, he knew very well that the presence of madame herself would be the best balm to apply to his friend's wounds. A quarter of an hour had hardly elapsed when he heard the sound of a door being softly opened, and closed with the same precaution. He listened to the light footfalls gliding down the staircase, and then heard the signal agreed upon. He immediately went out, and faithful to his promise, bent his way, without once turning round his head, through the streets of Fontainebleau, toward the doctor's dwelling.

CHAPTER XXI.

M. MALICORNE THE KEEPER OF THE RECORDS OF THE REALM OF FRANCE.

Two women, whose figures were completely concealed by their mantles, and whose masks effectually hid the upper portion of their faces, timidly followed Manicamp's steps. On the first floor, behind curtains of red damask, the soft light of a lamp placed upon a low table faintly illumined the room, at the other extremity of which, on a large bedstead, supported by spiral columns, around which curtains of the same color as those which deadened the rays of the lamp had been closely drawn, lay De Guiche, his head supported by pillows, his eyes looking as if the mists of death seemed gathering there; his long black hair, scattered over the pillow, set off the young man's hollowed and pale temples to great advantage. It could be easily perceived that fever was the principal occupant of that chamber. De Guiche was dreaming. His wandering mind was pursuing, through gloom and mystery, one of those wild creations which delirium engenders. Two or three drops of blood, still liquid, stained the floor. Manicamp hurriedly ran up the stairs, but paused at the threshold of the door, looked into the room, and seeing that everything was perfectly quiet, he advanced toward the foot of the large leathern

armchair, a specimen of furniture of the reign of Henry IV., and seeing that the nurse, as a matter of course, had dropped off to sleep, he awoke her, and begged her to pass into the adjoining room.

Then, standing by the side of the bed, he remained for a moment deliberating whether it would be better to awake De Guiche in order to acquaint him with the good news. But as he began to hear behind the door the rustling of silk dresses and the hurried breathing of his two companions, and as he already saw that the curtain which hung before the doorway seemed on the point of being impatiently drawn aside, he passed round the bed and followed the nurse into the next room. As soon as he had disappeared the curtain was raised, and his two female companions entered the room he had just left. The one who entered the first made a gesture to her companion, which riveted her to the spot where she stood, close to the door, and then resolutely advanced toward the bed, drew back the curtains along the iron rod, and threw them in thick folds behind the head of the bed. She gazed upon the comte's pallid face; remarked his right hand enveloped in linen whose dazzling whiteness was increased by the counterpane covered with dark leaves which was thrown across a portion of the sick couch. She shuddered as she saw a spot of blood becoming larger and larger upon the bandages. The young man's white chest was quite uncovered, as if the cool night air would assist his respiration. A small bandage fastened the dressings of the wound, around which a bluish circle of extravasated blood was gradually increasing in size. A deep sigh broke from her lips. She leaned against one of the columns of the bed, and gazed, through the holes in her mask, upon the harrowing spectacle before her. A hoarse, harsh sigh passed like a death rattle through the comte's clinched teeth. The masked lady seized his left hand, which felt as scorching as burning coals. But at the very moment she placed her icy hand upon it, the action of the cold was such that De Guiche opened his eyes, and by a look in which revived intelligence was dawning, seemed as if struggling back again into existence. The first thing upon which he fixed his gaze was this phantom standing erect by his bedside. At that sight his eyes became dilated, but without any appearance of consciousness in them. The lady thereupon made a sign to her companion, who had remained at the door; and in all probability the latter had already received her lesson, for in a clear tone of voice, and

without any hesitation whatever, she pronounced these words: "Monsieur le Comte, her royal highness, madame, is desirous of knowing how you are able to bear your wound, and to express to you, by my lips, her great regret at seeing you suffer."

As she pronounced the word "madame," De Guiche started; he had not as yet remarked the person to whom the voice belonged, and he naturally turned toward the direction whence it proceeded. But as he felt the cold hand still resting on his own, he again turned toward the motionless figure beside him. "Was it you who spoke, madame?" he asked, in a weak voice, "or is there another person beside you in the room?"

"Yes," replied the figure, in an almost unintelligible voice, as she bent down her head.

"Well," said the wounded man, with a great effort, "I thank you. Tell madame that I no longer regret dying, since she has remembered me."

At this word "dying," pronounced by one whose life seemed to hang on a thread, the masked lady could not restrain her tears, which flowed under her mask, and which appeared upon her cheeks just where the mask left her face bare. If De Guiche had been in fuller possession of his senses, he would have seen her tears roll like glistening pearls, and fall upon his bed. The lady, forgetting that she wore her mask, raised her hand as though to wipe her eyes, and meeting the rough velvet, she tore away her mask in anger, and threw it on the floor. At the unexpected apparition before him, which seemed to issue from a cloud, De Guiche uttered a cry and stretched out his arms toward her; but every word perished on his lips, and his strength seemed utterly abandoning him. His right hand, which had followed his first impulse, without calculating the amount of strength he had left, fell back again upon the bed, and immediately afterward the white linen was stained with a larger spot than before. In the meantime, the young man's eyes became dim, and closed, as if he were already struggling with the angel of death; and then, after a few involuntary movements, his head fell back motionless on his pillow; from pale he had become livid. The lady was frightened; but on this occasion, contrary to what is usually the case, fear became attractive. She leaned over the young man, gazed earnestly, fixedly at his pale and cold face, which she almost touched, then imprinted a rapid kiss upon De Guiche's left hand, who, trembling as if an electric

shock had passed through him, awoke a second time, opened his large eyes, incapable of recognition, and again fell into a state of complete insensibility. "Come," she said to her companion, "we must not remain here any longer; I shall be committing some folly or other."

"Madame, madame, your highness is forgetting your mask!" said her vigilant companion.

"Pick it up," replied her mistress, as she tottered almost senseless toward the staircase, and as the street door had been left only half closed, the two women, light as birds, passed through it, and with hurried steps returned to the palace. One of them ascended toward madame's apartments, where she disappeared; the other entered the rooms belonging to the maids of honor, namely, on the entresol, and having reached her own room, she sat down before a table, and without giving herself time even to breathe, wrote the following letter:

"This evening madame has been to see Monsieur de Guiche. Everything is going on well on this side. See that yours is the same, and do not forget to burn this paper."

She then folded the letter in a long thin form, and leaving her room with every possible precaution, crossed a corridor which led to the apartments appropriated to the gentlemen attached to Monsieur's service. She stopped before a door, under which, having previously knocked twice, in a short, quick manner, she thrust the paper, and fled. Then, returning to her own room, she removed every trace of her having gone out, and also of having written the letter. Amid the investigations she was so diligently pursuing she perceived on the table the mask which belonged to madame, and which, according to her mistress' directions, she had brought back, but had forgotten to restore to her. "Oh! oh!" she said, "I must not forget to do to-morrow what I have forgotten to do to-day."

And she took hold of the velvet mask by that part of it which covered the cheeks, and feeling that her thumb was wet, she looked at it. It was not only wet, but reddened. The mask had fallen upon one of the spots of blood which, we have already said, stained the floor, and from the black velvet outside which had accidentally come into contact with it, the blood had passed through to the inside, and stained the white cambric lining. "Oh! oh!" said Montalais, for

doubtless our readers have already recognized her by these various maneuvers, "I shall not give her back her mask; it is far too precious now."

And rising from her seat, she ran toward a box made of maple wood, which inclosed different articles of toilet and perfumery. "No, not here," she said; "such a treasure must not be abandoned to the slightest chance of detection."

Then, after a moment's silence, and with a smile that was peculiarly her own, she added: "Beautiful mask, stained with the blood of that brave knight, you shall go and join that collection of wonders, La Valliere's and Raoul's letters, that loving collection, indeed, which will some day or other form part of the history of France and of royalty. You shall be taken under Monsieur Malicorne's care," said the laughing girl, as she began to undress herself, "under the protection of that worthy Monsieur Malicorne," she said, blowing out the taper, "who thinks he was born only to become the chief usher of Monsieur's apartments, and whom I will make keeper of the records and historiographer of the house of Bourbon, and of the first houses in the kingdom. Let him grumble now, that discontented Malicorne," she added, as she drew the curtains and fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE JOURNEY.

THE next day being agreed upon for the departure, the king, at eleven o'clock precisely, descended the grand staircase with the two queens and madame, in order to enter his carriage drawn by six horses which were pawing the ground in impatience at the foot of the staircase. The whole court awaited the royal appearance in the *Fer-à-cheval* crescent, in their traveling costumes; the large number of saddled horses and carriages of ladies and gentlemen of the court, surrounded by their attendants, servants, and pages, formed a spectacle whose brilliancy could scarcely be equaled. The king entered his carriage with the two queens; madame was in the same with Monsieur. The maids of honor followed the example, and took their seats, two by two, in the carriages destined for them. The weather was exceedingly warm, a light breeze, which, early in the morning, all had thought would have been just sufficient to cool the air, soon became fiercely heated by the rays of the sun, although it

was hidden behind the clouds, and filtered through the heated vapor which rose from the ground like a scorching wind, bearing particles of fine dust against the faces of the hasty travelers. Madame was the first to complain of the heat. Monsieur's only reply was to throw himself back in the carriage, as if he were about to faint, and to inundate himself with scents and perfumes, uttering the deepest sighs all the while; whereupon madame said to him, with her most amiable expression: "Really, Monsieur, I fancied that you would have been polite enough, on account of the terrible heat, to have left me my carriage to myself, and to have performed the journey yourself on horseback."

"Ride on horseback!" cried the prince, with an accent of dismay which showed how little idea he had of adopting this strange project; "you cannot suppose such a thing, madame; my skin would peel off if I were to expose myself to such a burning air as this."

Madame began to laugh.

"You can take my parasol," she said.

"But the trouble of holding it!" replied Monsieur, with the greatest coolness; "besides, I have no horse."

"How, no horse?" replied the princess, who, if she did not obtain the solitude she required, at least obtained the amusement of teasing. "No horse! You are mistaken, Monsieur; for I see your favorite bay out yonder."

"My bay horse!" exclaimed the prince, attempting to lean forward to look out of the door; but the movement he was obliged to make cost him so much trouble that he soon hastened to resume his immobility.

"Yes," said madame; "your horse, led by Monsieur de Malicorne."

"Poor beast," replied the prince; "how warm it will soon be!"

And with these words he closed his eyes, like a man on the point of death. Madame, on her side, reclined indolently in the other corner of the carriage, and closed her eyes also, not, however, to sleep, but to think more at her ease. In the meantime the king, seated in the front seat of the carriage, the back of which he had yielded up to the two queens, was a prey to that restless, feverish contrariety experienced by anxious lovers, who, without being able to quench their ardent thirst, are ceaselessly desirous of seeing the loved object, and then go away partially satisfied, without perceiving that they have acquired a more burning thirst than ever. The king, whose carriage headed the

procession, could not from the place he occupied perceive the carriages of the ladies and maids of honor, which followed in a line behind it. Besides, he was obliged to answer the eternal questions of the young queen, who, happy to have with her "her dear husband," as she called him in utter forgetfulness of royal etiquette, invested him with all her affection, stifled him with her attentions, afraid that some one might come to take him from her, or that he himself might suddenly take a fancy to leave her society. Anne of Austria, whom nothing at that moment occupied except the occasional sharp throbbings in her bosom, looked pleased and delighted, and although she perfectly conceived the king's impatience, tantalizingly prolonged his sufferings by unexpectedly resuming the conversation at the very moment the king, asborbed in his own reflections, began to muse over his secret attachment. Everything seemed to combine—not alone the little teasing attentions of the queen, but also the queen-mother's tantalizing interruptions—to make the king's position almost insupportable; for he knew not how to control the restless longings of his heart. At first he complained of the heat—a complaint which was merely preliminary to other complaints, but with sufficient tact to prevent Maria Theresa guessing his real object. Understanding the king's remark literally, she began to fan him with her ostrich plumes. But the heat passed away, and the king then complained of cramps and stiffness in his legs, and as the carriages at that moment stopped to change horses, the queen said: "Shall I get out with you? I too feel tired of sitting. We can walk on a little distance; the carriage will overtake us, and we can resume our places again presently."

The king frowned; it is a hard trial a jealous woman makes her husband submit to whose fidelity she suspects, when, although herself a prey to jealousy, she watches herself so narrowly that she avoids giving any pretext for an angry feeling. The king, therefore, in the present case, could not refuse; he accepted the offer, alighted from the carriage, gave his arm to the queen, and walked up and down with her while the horses were being changed. As he walked along, he cast an envious glance upon the courtiers, who were fortunate enough to be performing the journey on horseback. The queen soon found out that the promenade she had suggested afforded the king as little pleasure as he had experienced from riding in the carriage. She accordingly expressed a wish to return to her carriage,

and the king conducted her to the door, but did not get in with her. He stepped back a few paces, and looked among the file of carriages for the purpose of recognizing the one in which he took so strong an interest. At the door of the sixth carriage he saw La Valliere's fair countenance. As the king thus stood motionless, wrapt in thought, without perceiving that everything was ready, and that he alone was causing the delay, he heard a voice close beside him addressing him in the most respectful manner. It was M. Malicorne, in a complete costume of an equerry, holding over his left arm the bridles of a couple of horses.

"Your majesty asked for a horse, I believe," he said.

"A horse? Have you one of my horses here?" inquired the king, who endeavored to remember the person who addressed him, and whose face was not as yet very familiar to him.

"Sire," replied Malicorne, "at all events I have a horse which is at your majesty's service."

And Malicorne pointed at Monsieur's bay horse, which madame had observed. It was a beautiful creature, and most royally caparisoned.

"This is not one of my horses, monsieur," said the king.

"Sire, it is a horse out of his royal highness' stables; but his royal highness does not ride when the weather is as hot as it is now."

The king did not reply, but hastily approached the horse, which stood pawing the ground with his foot. Malicorne hastened to hold the stirrup for him, but the king was already in the saddle. Restored to good humor by this lucky accident, the king hastened toward the queen's carriage, where he was anxiously expected; and notwithstanding Maria Theresa's thoughtful and preoccupied air, he said: "I have been fortunate enough to find this horse, and I intend to avail myself of it. I felt stifled in the carriage. Adieu, ladies."

Then bending most gracefully over the arched neck of his beautiful steed, he disappeared in a second. Anne of Austria leaned forward, in order to look after him as he rode away; he did not get very far, for when he reached the sixth carriage he reined in his horse suddenly and took off his hat. He saluted La Valliere, who uttered a cry of surprise as she saw him, blushing at the same time with pleasure. Montalais, who occupied the other seat in the carriage, made the king a most respectful bow. And then, with all the tact of a woman, she pretended to be exceed-

ingly interested in the landscape, and withdrew herself into the left-hand corner. The conversation between the king and La Valliere began, as all lovers' conversations generally do, namely, by eloquent looks and by a few words utterly void of common sense. The king explained how warm he had felt in his carriage, so much so indeed that he could almost regard the horse he then rode as a blessing thrown in his way. "And," he added, "my benefactor is an exceedingly intelligent man, for he seemed to guess my thoughts intuitively. I have now only one wish, that of learning the name of the gentleman who so cleverly assisted his king out of his dilemma, and extricated him from his cruel position."

Montalais, during this colloquy, the first words of which had awakened her attention, had slightly altered her position, and had contrived so as to meet the king's look as he finished his remark. It followed very naturally that the king looked inquiringly as much at her as at La Valliere; she had every reason to suppose that it was she who was appealed to, and consequently might be permitted to answer. She therefore said: "Sire, the horse which your majesty is riding belongs to Monsieur, and was being led by one of his royal highness' gentlemen."

"And what is that gentleman's name, may I ask, mademoiselle?"

"Monsieur de Malicorne, sire."

The name produced its usual effect, for the king repeated it smilingly.

"Yes, sire," replied Aure. "Stay, it is that gentleman who is galloping on my left hand;" and she pointed out Malicorne, who, with a very sanctified expression, was galloping on the left side of the carriage, knowing perfectly well that they were talking of him at that very moment, but sitting in his saddle as if he were deaf and dumb.

"Yes," said the king, "that is the gentleman; I remember his face, and will not forget his name;" and the king looked tenderly at La Valliere.

Aure had now nothing further to do; she had let Malicorne's name fall; the soil was good; all that was now left to be done was to let the name take root, and the event would bear its fruit in due time. She, consequently, threw herself back in her corner, feeling perfectly justified in making as many agreeable signs of recognition as she liked to Malicorne, since the latter had had the happiness of pleasing the king. As it will very readily be believed,

Montalais was not mistaken; and Malicorne, with his quick ear and his sly look, seemed to interpret her remark as "All goes on well," the whole being accompanied by a pantomimic action, which he fancied conveyed something resembling a kiss.

"Alas! mademoiselle," said the king, after a moment's pause, "the liberty and freedom of the country is soon about to cease; your attendance upon madame will be more strictly enforced, and we shall see each other no more."

"Your majesty is too much attached to madame," replied Louise, "not to come and see her very frequently; and whenever your majesty may pass across the apartments——"

"Ah!" said the king, in a tender voice, which was gradually lowered in its tone, "to perceive is not to see, and yet it seems that it would be quite sufficient for you."

Louise did not answer a syllable; a sigh filled her heart almost to bursting, but she stifled it.

"You exercise a great control over yourself," said the king to Louise, who smiled upon him with a melancholy expression. "Exert the strength you have in loving fondly," he continued, "and I will bless Heaven for having bestowed it on you."

La Valliere still remained silent, but raised her eyes, brimful of affection, toward the king. Louis, as if he had been overcome by this burning glance, passed his hand across his forehead, and pressing the sides of his horse with his knees, made him bound several paces forward. La Valliere, leaning back in her carriage, with her eyes half-closed, gazed fixedly upon the king, whose plumes were floating in the air; she could not but admire his graceful carriage, his delicate and nervous limbs, which pressed his horse's side, and the regular outline of his features, which his beautiful curling hair set off to great advantage, revealing occasionally his small and well-formed ear. In fact, the poor girl was in love, and she reveled in her innocent affection. In a few moments the king was again by her side.

"Do you not perceive," he said, "how terribly your silence affects me? Oh! mademoiselle, how pitilessly immovable you would become if you were ever to resolve to break off all acquaintance with any one; and then, too, I think you changeable; in fact—in fact, I dread this deep affection which fills my whole being."

"Oh! sire, you are mistaken," said La Valliere; "if ever I love, it will be for my whole life."

"If you love, you say," exclaimed the king; "you do not love now, then?"

She hid her face in her hands.

"You see," said the king, "that I am right in accusing you; you must admit that you are changeable, capricious, a coquette, perhaps."

"Oh, no! sire, be perfectly satisfied on that. No, I say again; no, no!"

"Promise me, then, that for me you will always be the same."

"Oh! always, sire."

"That you will never show any of that severity which would break my heart, none of that fickleness of manner which would be worse than death to me."

"Oh! no, no!"

"Very well, then; but listen. I like promises, I like to place under the guarantee of an oath, under the protection of Heaven, in fact, everything which interests my heart and my affections. Promise me, or rather, swear to me, that if in the life we are about to commence, a life which will be full of sacrifice, mystery, anxiety, disappointment, and misunderstanding; swear to me that if we should be deceiving, or should misunderstand each other, or should be judging each other unjustly, for that indeed would be criminal in love such as ours; swear to me, Louise——"

She trembled with agitation to the very depths of her heart; it was the first time she had heard her name pronounced in that manner by her royal lover. As for the king, taking off his glove, and placing his ungloved hand within the carriage, he continued: "Swear, that never in all our quarrels will we allow one night even to pass by, if any misunderstanding should arise between us, without a visit, or at least a message, from either, in order to convey consolation and repose to the other."

La Valliere took her lover's burning hand between her own icy palms, and pressed it softly, until a movement of the horse, frightened by the proximity of the wheels, obliged her to abandon her happiness. She had sworn as he wished her.

"Return, sire," she said, "return to the queen. I foresee a storm rising yonder, which threatens my peace of mind."

Louis obeyed, saluted Mlle. de Montalais, and set off at a gallop to rejoin the queen's carriage. As he passed Monsieur's carriage, he observed that he was fast asleep, although madame, on her part, was wide awake. As the

king passed her, she said, "What a beautiful horse, sire! Is it not Monsieur's bay horse?"

The young queen merely remarked: "Are you better now, sire?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

TRIUMFEMINATE.

On the king's arrival in Paris, he sat at the council which had been summoned, and worked for a certain portion of the day. The queen remained with the queen-mother, and burst into tears as soon as she had taken leave of the king. "Ah, madame!" she said, "the king no longer loves me! What will become of me?"

"A husband always loves his wife when she is like you," replied Anne of Austria.

"A time may come when he will love another woman instead of me."

"What do you call loving?"

"Always thinking of a person—always seeking her society."

"Do you happen to have remarked," said Anne of Austria, "that the king has ever done anything of the sort?"

"No, madame," said the young queen hesitatingly.

"What is there to complain of, then, Marie?"

"You will admit that the king leaves me?"

"The king, my daughter, belongs to his people."

"And that is the very reason why he no longer belongs to me; and that is the reason, too, why I shall find myself, as so many queens have been before me, forsaken and forgotten, while glory and honors will be reserved for others. Oh, my mother! the king is so handsome! how often will others tell him that they love him, and how much, indeed, they must do so!"

"It is very seldom that women love the man in loving the king. But should that happen, which I doubt, you should rather wish, Marie, that such women should really love your husband. In the first place, the devoted love of a mistress is a rapid element of the dissolution of a lover's affection; and then, by dint of loving, the mistress loses all influence over her lover, whose power or wealth she does not covet, caring only for his affection. Wish, therefore, that the king should love but lightly and that his mistress should love with all her heart."

"Oh, my mother, what power may not a deep affection exercise over him!"

"And yet you say you are abandoned?"

"Quite true, quite true; I speak absurdly. There is a feeling of anguish, however, which I can never control."

"And that is?"

"The king may make a happy choice—may find a home, with all the tender influences of home, not far from that we can offer him—a home with children round him, the children of another woman than myself. Oh, madame! I should die if I were but to see the king's children."

"Marie, Marie," replied the queen-mother, with a smile, and she took the young queen's hand in her own, "remember what I am going to say, and let it always be a consolation to you: the king cannot have a dauphin without you."

With this remark the queen-mother quitted her daughter-in-law, in order to meet madame, whose arrival in the grand cabinet had just been announced by one of the pages. Madame had scarcely taken time to change her dress. Her face revealed her agitation, which betrayed a plan the execution of which occupied, while the result disturbed, her mind.

"I came to ascertain," she said, "if your majesties are suffering any fatigue from our journey."

"None at all," said the queen-mother.

"But a slight one," replied Maria Theresa.

"I have suffered from annoyance more than from anything else," said madame.

"What annoyance?" inquired Anne of Austria.

"The fatigue the king undergoes in riding about on horseback."

"That does the king good."

"And it was I who advised him to do it," said Maria Theresa, turning pale.

Madame said not a word in reply; but one of those smiles which were peculiarly her own flitted for a moment across her lips, without passing over the rest of her face; then, immediately changing the conversation, she continued, "We shall find Paris precisely the Paris we left it; the same intrigues, plots, and flirtations going on."

"Intrigues! What intrigues do you allude to?" inquired the queen-mother.

"People are talking a good deal about Monsieur Fouquet and Madame Plessis-Belliere."

"Who makes up the number to about ten thousand," re-

plied the queen-mother. "But what are the plots you speak of?"

"We have, it seems, certain misunderstandings with Holland to settle."

"What about?"

"Monsieur has been telling me the story of the medals."

"Oh!" exclaimed the young queen, "you mean those medals which were struck in Holland, on which a cloud is seen passing across the sun, which is the king's device. You are wrong in calling that a plot—it is an insult."

"But so contemptible that the king can well despise it," replied the queen-mother. "Well, what are the flirtations which are alluded to? Do you mean that of Madame d'Olonne?"

"No, no; nearer ourselves than that."

"*Casa de usted,*" murmured the queen-mother, and without moving her lips, in her daughter-in-law's ear, and also without being overheard by madame, who thus continued:

"You know the terrible news?"

"Oh, yes; Monsieur de Guiche's wound."

"And you attribute it, I suppose, as every one else does, to an accident which happened to him while hunting?"

"Yes, of course," said both the queens together, their interest awakened.

Madame drew closer to them as she said, in a low tone of voice, "It was a duel."

"Ah!" said Anne of Austria, in a severe tone; for in her ears the word "duel," which had been forbidden in France during the time she had reigned over it, had a strange sound.

"A most deplorable duel, which has nearly cost Monsieur two of his best friends, and the king two of his best servants."

"What was the cause of the duel?" inquired the young queen, animated by a secret instinct.

"Flirtations," repeated madame triumphantly. "The gentlemen in question were conversing about the virtue of a particular lady belonging to the court. One of them thought that Pallas was a very second-rate person compared to her; the other pretended that the lady in question was an imitation of Venus alluring Mars; and thereupon the two gentlemen fought as fiercely as Hector and Achilles."

"Venus alluring Mars?" said the young queen, in a low tone of voice, without venturing to examine into the allegory very deeply.

"Who is the lady?" inquired Anne of Austria abruptly. "You said, I believe, she was one of the ladies of honor?"

"Did I say so?" replied madame.

"Yes; at least I thought I heard you mention it."

"Are you not aware that such a woman is of ill-omen to a royal house?"

"Is it not Mademoiselle de la Valliere?" said the queen-mother.

"Yes, indeed, that plain-looking creature."

"I thought she was affianced to a gentleman who certainly is not, at least I suppose so, either Monsieur de Guiche or Monsieur de Wardes?"

"Very possibly, madame."

The young queen took up a piece of tapestry, and began to unpick with an affectation of tranquillity which her trembling fingers contradicted.

"What were you saying about Venus and Mars?" pursued the queen-mother; "is there a Mars also?"

"She boasts of that being the case."

"Did you say she boasts of it?"

"That was the cause of the duel."

"And Monsieur de Guiche upheld the cause of Mars?"

"Yes, certainly; like the devoted servant he is."

"The devoted servant of whom?" exclaimed the young queen, forgetting her reserve in allowing her jealous feeling to escape her.

"Mars, not being able to be defended except at the expense of this Venus," replied madame, "Monsieur de Guiche maintained the perfect innocence of Mars, and no doubt affirmed that it was a mere boast of Venus."

"And Monsieur de Wardes," said Anne of Austria quietly, "spread the report that Venus was right, I suppose?"

"Oh, De Wardes," thought madame, "you shall pay most dearly for the wound you have given that noblest—that best of men!" And she began to attack De Wardes with the greatest bitterness; thus discharging her own and De Guiche's debt, with the assurance that she was working the future ruin of her enemy. She said so much, in fact, that had Manicamp been there, he would have regretted that he had shown such strong regard for his friend, inasmuch as it resulted in the ruin of his unfortunate foe.

"I see nothing in the whole affair but one cause of mischief, and that is La Valliere herself," said the queen-mother.

The young queen resumed her work with a perfect indifference of manner, while madame listened eagerly.

"I do not yet quite understand what you said just now about the danger of coquetry," resumed Anne of Austria.

"It is quite true," madame hastened to say, "that if the girl had not been a coquette, Mars would not have thought at all about her."

The repetition of this word Mars brought a passing color on the queen's face; but she still continued her work.

"I will not permit that, in my court, gentlemen should be set against one another in this manner," said Anne of Austria calmly. "Such manners were useful enough, perhaps, in a time when the divided nobility had no other rallying point than mere gallantry. At that time women, whose sway was absolute and undivided, were privileged to encourage men's valor by frequent trials of their courage. But now, thank Heaven! there is but one master in France, and to him every thought of the mind, and every pulse of the body are due. I will not allow my son to be deprived of any one of his servants." And she turned toward the young queen, saying, "What is to be done with this La Valliere?"

"La Valliere?" said the queen, apparently surprised, "I do not even know the name;" and she accompanied this remark by one of those cold fixed smiles which are only observed on royal lips.

Madame was herself a princess great in every respect, great in intelligence, great by birth and pride; the queen's reply, however, completely astonished her, and she was obliged to pause for a moment in order to recover herself. "She is one of my maids of honor," she replied, with a bow.

"In that case," retorted Maria Theresa, in the same tone, "it is your affair, my sister, and not ours."

"I beg your pardon," resumed Anne of Austria, "it is my affair. And I perfectly well understand," she pursued, addressing a look full of intelligence at madame, "madame's motive for saying what she has just said."

"Everything which emanates from you, madame," said the English princess, "proceeds from the lips of Wisdom."

"If we send this girl back again to her own family," said Maria Theresa gently, "we must bestow a pension upon her."

"Which I will provide for out of my income," exclaimed madame.

"No, no," interrupted Anne of Austria; "no disturbance, I beg. The king dislikes that the slightest disrespectful remark should be made of any lady. Let everything be done quite quietly. Will you have the kindness, madame, to send for this girl here; and you, my daughter, will have the goodness to retire to your own room."

The old queen's entreaties were commands, and as Maria Theresa rose to return to her own apartments, madame rose in order to send a page to summon La Valliere.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FIRST QUARREL.

La Valliere entered the queen-mother's apartments without in the least suspecting that a serious plot was being concerted against her. She thought it was for something connected with her duties, and never had the queen-mother been unkind to her when such was the case. Besides, not being immediately under the control or direction of Anne of Austria, she could only have an official connection with her, to which her own gentleness of disposition, and the rank of the august princess, made her yield on every occasion with the best possible grace. She therefore advanced toward the queen-mother with that soft and gentle smile which constituted her principal charm, and as she did not approach sufficiently close, Anne of Austria signed to her to come nearer. Madame then entered the room, and with a perfectly calm air took her seat beside her mother-in-law, and continued the work which Maria Theresa had begun. When La Valliere, instead of the directions which she expected to receive immediately on entering the room, perceived these preparations, she looked with curiosity, if not with uneasiness, at the two princesses. Anne seemed full of thought, while madame maintained an affectation of indifference which would have alarmed a less timid person even than Louise.

"Mademoiselle," said the queen-mother suddenly, without attempting to moderate or disguise her Spanish accent, which she never failed to do except when she was angry, "come closer; we were talking of you, as every one else seems to be doing."

"Of me!" exclaimed La Valliere, turning pale.

"Do you pretend to be ignorant of it—are you not aware

of the duel between Monsieur de Guiche and Monsieur de Wardes?"

"Oh, madame! I heard of it yesterday," said La Valliere, clasping her hands together.

"And did you not foresee this quarrel?"

"Why should I, madame?"

"Because two men never fight without a motive, and because you must be aware of the motive which awakened the animosity of the two in question."

"I am perfectly ignorant of it, madame."

"A persevering denial is a very commonplace mode of defense, and you, who have great pretension to be witty and clever, ought to avoid commonplaces. What else have you to say?"

"Oh! madame, your majesty terrifies me with your cold severity of manner; but I do not understand how I can have incurred your displeasure, or in what respect people can occupy themselves about me."

"Then I will tell you. Monsieur de Guiche has been obliged to undertake your defense."

"My defense?"

"Yes. He is a gallant knight, and beautiful adventuresses like to see brave knights couch their lances in their honor. But for my part, I hate fields of battle, and more than all, do I hate adventures, and—take my remark as you please."

La Valliere sank at the queen's feet, who turned her back upon her. She stretched out her hands toward madame, who laughed in her face. A feeling of pride made her rise to her feet.

"I have begged your majesty to tell me what is the crime I am accused of; I can claim this at your majesty's hands; and I observe that I am condemned before I am even permitted to justify myself."

"Eh! indeed," cried Anne of Austria, "listen to her beautiful phrases, madame, and to her fine sentiments; she is an inexhaustible well of tenderness and of heroic expressions. One can easily see, young lady, that we have cultivated our mind in the society of crowned heads."

La Valliere felt struck to the heart; she became, not paler, but white as a lily, and all her strength forsook her.

"I wished to inform you," interrupted the queen disdainfully, "that if you continue to nourish such feelings, you will humiliate us other women to such a degree that we shall be ashamed of appearing before you. Become simple

in your manners. By the bye, I am informed that you are affianced; is it the case?"

La Valliere pressed her hand over her heart, which was wrung with a fresh pang.

"Answer when you are spoken to!"

"Yes, madame."

"To a gentleman?"

"Yes, madame."

"His name?"

"The Vicomte de Bragelonne."

"Are you aware that it is an exceedingly fortunate circumstance for you, mademoiselle, that such is the case; and without fortune or position as you are, or without any very great personal advantages, you ought to bless Heaven for having procured you such a future as seems to be in store for you."

La Valliere did not reply.

"Where is this Vicomte de Bragelonne?" pursued the queen.

"In England," said madame, "where the report of this young lady's success will not fail to reach him."

"Oh, Heaven!" murmured La Valliere, in despair.

"Very well, mademoiselle!" said Anne of Austria, "we will get this young gentleman to return, and send you away somewhere with him. If you are of a different opinion—for girls have strange views and fancies at times—trust to me, I will put you in a proper path again. I have done as much for girls who are not so good as you are, perhaps."

La Valliere ceased to hear the queen, who pitilessly added: "I will send you somewhere by yourself, where you will be able to procure a little serious reflection. Reflection calms the ardor of the blood, and swallows up all the illusions of youth. I suppose you have understood what I have been saying?"

"Madame, madame!"

"Not a word."

"I am innocent of everything your majesty can suppose. Oh, madame! you are a witness of my despair. I love, I respect your majesty so much."

"It would be far better not to respect me at all," said the queen, with a chilling irony of manner. "It would be far better if you were not innocent. Do you presume to suppose that I should be satisfied simply to leave you unpunished if you had committed the fault?"

"Oh, madame, you are killing me!"

"No acting, if you please, or I will undertake the *dénouement* of the comedy; leave the room; return to your own apartment, and I trust my less n may be of service to you."

"Madame!" said La Valliere to the Duchess d'Orléans, whose hands she seized in her own, "do you, who are so good, intercede for me."

"I!" replied the latter, with an insulting joy, "I—good—Ah, mademoiselle, you think nothing of the kind;" and with a rude, hasty gesture she repulsed the young girl's hand.

La Valliere, instead of giving way, as from her extreme pallor and from her tears the two princesses might possibly have expected, suddenly resumed her calm and dignified air; she bowed profoundly, and left the room.

"Well!" said Anne of Austria to madame, "do you think she will begin again?"

"I always suspect those gentle and patient characters," replied madame. "Nothing is more full of courage than a patient heart, nothing is more self-reliant than a gentle spirit."

"I feel I may almost venture to assure you she will think twice before she looks at the god Mars again."

"So long as she does not obtain the protection of his buckler I do not care," retorted madame.

A proud, defiant look of the queen-mother was the reply to this objection, which was by no means deficient in *finesse;* and both of them, almost sure of their victory, went to look for Maria Theresa, who had been engaged, while awaiting their arrival, in endeavoring to disguise her impatience.

It was about half-past six in the evening, and the king had just partaken of some refreshment. He lost no time; but no sooner was the repast finished, and business matters settled, than he took St. Aignan by the arm, and desired him to lead him to La Valliere's apartments. The courtier uttered a loud exclamation.

"Well, what is that for? It is a habit you will have to adopt, and in order to adopt a habit you must begin by something or another at first."

"Oh, sire!" said St. Aignan, "it is hardly possible, for every one can be seen entering or leaving those apartments. If, however, some pretext or other were made use of—if your majesty, for instance, would wait until madame were in her own apartments——"

"No pretexts; no delays. I have had enough of these impediments and these mysteries; I cannot perceive in

what respect the king of France dishonors himself in conversing with an amiable and clever girl. Evil be to him who evil thinks."

"Will your majesty forgive an excess of zeal on my part?"

"Speak freely."

"And the queen?"

"True, true; I always wish the most entire respect to be shown to her majesty. Well, then, this evening only will I pay Mademoiselle de la Valliere a visit, and after to-day I will make use of any pretext you like. To-morrow we will devise all sorts of means; to-night I have not the time."

St. Aignan did not reply; he descended the steps, preceding the king, and crossed the different courtyards with a feeling of shame, which the distinguished honor of accompanying the king did not remove. The reason was, that St. Aignan wished to stand well with madame, as well as the two queens; and also, that he did not, on the other hand, wish to displease Mlle. de la Valliere; and in order to carry out so many promising affairs, it was difficult to avoid jostling against some obstacle or other. Besides, the windows of the young queen's rooms, those of the queen-mother's, and of madame herself, looked out upon the courtyard of the maids of honor. To be seen, therefore, accompanying the king would be effectually to quarrel with three great and influential princesses—with three women whose authority was unbounded—for the purpose of supporting the ephemeral credit of a mistress. The unhappy St. Aignan, who had not displayed a very great amount of courage in taking La Valliere's part in the park of Fontainebleau, did not feel himself any braver in the broad daylight, and found a thousand defects in the poor girl which he was most eager to communicate to the king. But his trial soon finished—the courtyards were crossed; not a curtain was drawn aside, nor a window opened. The king walked hastily, because of his impatience, and then also because of the long legs of St. Aignan, who preceded him. At the door, however, St. Aignan wished to retire, but the king desired him to remain; this was a delicate consideration on the king's part, which the courtier could very well have dispensed with. He had to follow Louis into La Valliere's apartment. As soon as the king arrived the young girl dried her tears, but did it so precipitately that the king perceived it. He questioned her most anxiously and tenderly, and pressed her to tell him the cause of her emotion.

"I have nothing the matter with me, sire," she said.

"And yet you were weeping."

"Oh, no, indeed, sire."

"Look, St. Aignan, and tell me if I am mistaken."

St. Aignan ought to have answered, but he was greatly embarrassed.

"At all events, your eyes are red, mademoiselle," said the king.

"The dust of the road merely, sire."

"No, no; you no longer possess that air of supreme contentment which renders you so beautiful and so attractive. You do not look at me. Why avoid my gaze?" he said, as she turned aside her head. "In Heaven's name, what is the matter?" he inquired, beginning to lose all command over himself.

"Nothing at all, sire; and I am perfectly ready to assure your majesty that my mind is as free from anxiety as you could possibly wish."

"Your mind at ease, when I see you are embarrassed at the slightest thing. Has any one wounded or annoyed you?"

"No, no, sire."

"I insist upon knowing if such really be the case," said the young prince, his eyes sparkling.

"No one, sire, no one has in any way offended me."

"In that case, do resume your gentle air of gayety, or that sweet melancholy look which I so loved in you this morning; for pity's sake, do so."

"Yes, sire, yes."

The king struck the ground impatiently with his foot, saying, "Such a change is positively inexplicable." And he looked at St. Aignan, who had also remarked La Valliere's heavy languor of manner, as well as the king's impatience.

"It was utterly useless for the king to entreat, and as useless for him to try his utmost to overcome her positiveness, which was but too apparent, and did not in reality exist; the poor girl was completely overwhelmed—the aspect of death itself could not have awakened her from her torpor. The king saw in her repeated negative replies a mystery full of unkindness; he began to look all round the apartment with a suspicious air. There happened to be in La Valliere's room a miniature of Athos. The king remarked this portrait, which bore a considerable resemblance to Bragelonne, for it had been taken when the comte was

quite a young man. He looked at it with a threatening air. La Valliere, in her depressed state of mind, and very far indeed from thinking of this portrait, could not conjecture the king's preoccupation. And yet the king's mind was occupied with a terrible remembrance, which had more than once taken possession of his mind, but which he had always driven away. He recalled the intimacy which had existed between the two young people from their birth; the engagement which had followed, and that Athos had himself come to solicit La Valliere's hand for Raoul. He, therefore, could not but suppose that, on her return to Paris, La Valliere had found news from London awaiting her, and that this news had counterbalanced the influence which he had been enabled to exert over her. He immediately felt himself stung, as it were, by feelings of the wildest jealousy; and he again questioned her with increased bitterness. La Valliere could not reply, unless she were to acknowledge everything, which would be to accuse the queen, and madame also; and the consequence would be that she would have to enter into an open warfare with these two great and powerful princesses. She thought within herself that as she made no attempt to conceal from the king what was passing in her own mind, the king ought to be able to read her heart, in spite of her silence; and that, if he really loved her, he would have understood and guessed everything. What was sympathy, then, if it were not that divine flame which possesses the property of enlightening the heart and of saving lovers the necessity of an expression of their thoughts and feelings? She maintained her silence, therefore, satisfying herself with sighing, weeping, and concealing her face in her hands. These sighs and tears, which had at first distressed, and then terrified Louis XIV., now irritated him. He could not bear any opposition—not the opposition which tears and sighs exhibited any more than opposition of any other kind. His remarks, therefore, became bitter, urgent, and openly aggressive in their nature. This was a fresh cause of distress for the poor girl. From that very circumstance, therefore, which she regarded as an injustice on her lover's part, she drew sufficient courage to bear, not only her other troubles, but even this one also.

The king next began to accuse her in direct terms. La Valliere did not even attempt to defend herself; she endured all his accusations without according any other reply than that of shaking her head; without making any other remark than that which escapes every heart in deep distress,

by a prayerful appeal to Heaven for help. But this ejaculation, instead of calming the king's displeasure, rather increased it. He, moreover, saw himself seconded by St. Aignan, for St. Aignan, as we have observed, having seen the storm increasing, and not knowing the extent of the regard of which Louis XIV. was capable, felt, by anticipation, all the collected wrath of the three princesses, and the near approach of poor La Valliere's downfall; and he was not true knight enough to resist the fear that he himself might possibly be dragged down in the impending ruin. St. Aignan did not reply to the king's questions except by short, dry remarks, pronounced half-aloud; and by abrupt gestures, whose object was to make things worse, and bring about a misunderstanding, the result of which would be to free him from the annoyance of having to cross the courtyards in broad open day, in order to follow his illustrious companion to La Valliere's apartments. In the meantime, the king's anger momentarily increased; he made two or three steps toward the door, as if to leave the room, but then returned; the young girl did not, however, raise her head, although the sound of his footsteps might have warned her that her lover was leaving her. He drew himself up for a moment before her, with his arms crossed.

"For the last time, mademoiselle," he said, "will you speak? Will you assign a reason for this change, for this fickleness, for this caprice?"

"What can I say?" murmured La Valliere. "Do you not see, sire, that I am completely overwhelmed at this moment; that I have no power of will, or thought, or speech?"

"Is it so difficult, then, to speak the truth? You would have told me the truth in fewer words than those in which you have just now expressed yourself."

"But the truth about what, sire?"

"About everything."

La Valliere was just on the point of revealing the whole truth to the king, her arms made a sudden movement as if they were about to open, but her lips remained silent, and her arms again fell listlessly by her side. The poor girl had not yet endured sufficient unhappiness to risk the necessary revelation.

"I know nothing," she stammered.

"Oh!" exclaimed the king, "this is no longer mere coquetry or caprice, it is treason."

And this time nothing could restrain him, the impulses

of his heart were not sufficient to induce him to turn back, and he darted out of the room with a gesture full of despair. St. Aignan followed him, wishing for nothing better than to leave the place.

Louis XIV. did not pause until he reached the staircase, and grasping the balustrade, said:

"You see how shamefully I have been duped?"

"How, sire?" inquired the favorite.

"De Guiche fought on the Vicomte de Bragelonne's account, and this De Bragelonne—oh! St. Aignan, she still loves him. I vow to you, St. Aignan, that if in three days hence, there were to remain but an atom of affection for her in my heart, I should die from very shame!"

And the king resumed his way to his own apartments.

"I assured your majesty how it would be," murmured St. Aignan, continuing to follow the king, and timidly glancing up at the different windows. Unfortunately, their return was different to what their departure had been. A curtain was stealthily drawn aside, madame was behind it. She had seen the king leave the apartments of the maids of honor, and as soon as she observed that his majesty had passed, she left her own apartments with hurried steps, and ran up the staircase which led to the room the king had just left.

CHAPTER XXV.

DESPAIR.

As soon as the king had left her, La Valliere raised herself from the ground, and extended her arms, as if to follow and detain him; but when, having violently closed the door, the sound of his retreating footsteps could be heard in the distance, she had hardly sufficient strength left to totter toward and fall at the foot of her crucifix. There she remained, broken-hearted, absorbed, and overwhelmed by her grief, forgetful of and indifferent to everything but her profound grief itself—a grief which she could not comprehend otherwise than by instinct and acute sensation. In the midst of the wild tumult of her thoughts, La Valliere heard her door open again; she started, and turned round, thinking that it was the king who had returned. She was deceived, however, for it was madame who appeared at the door. What did she now care for madame? Again

she sank down, her head supported by her *priedieu* chair. It was madame, agitated, irritated, and threatening. But what was that to her?

"Mademoiselle," said the princess, standing before La Valliere, "this is very fine, I admit, to kneel, and pray, and make a pretense of being religious; but however submissive you may be in your addresses to Heaven, it is desirable that you should pay some little attention to the wishes of those who reign and rule here below."

La Valliere raised her head painfully in token of respect.

"Not long since," continued madame, "a certain recommendation was addressed to you, I believe?"

La Valliere's fixed and wild gaze showed how entire her forgetfulness or her ignorance was.

"The queen recommended you," continued madame, "to conduct yourself in such a manner that no one could be justified in spreading any reports about you."

La Valliere darted an inquiring look toward her.

"I will not," continued madame, "allow my household, which is that of the first princess of the blood, to set an evil example to the court; you would be the cause of such an example. I beg you to understand, therefore, in the absence of any witness of your shame, for I do not wish to humiliate you, that you are from this moment at perfect liberty to leave, and that you can return to your mother at Blois."

La Valliere could not sink lower, nor could she suffer more than she had already suffered. Her countenance did not even change, but she remained with her hands crossed over her knees, like the figure of the Magdalen.

"Did you hear me?" said madame.

A shiver which passed through her whole frame was La Valliere's only reply. And as the victim gave no other signs of life, madame left the room. And then, her very respiration suspended, and her blood almost congealed, as it were, in her veins, La Valliere by degrees felt that the pulsations of her wrists, her neck, and temples began to throb more and more heavily. These pulsations, as they gradually increased, soon changed into a species of brain fever, and in her temporary delirium she saw the figures of her friends, contending with her enemies, floating before her vision. She heard, too, mingled together in her deafened ears words of menace and words of fond affection; she seemed raised out of her existence, as though it were upon the wings of a mighty tempest, and in the dim horizon of

the path along which her delirium hurried her, she saw the stone which covered her tomb upraised, and the dark and appalling interior of eternal night revealed to her distracted gaze. But the horror of the dream which had possessed her senses soon faded away, and she was again restored to the habitual resignation of her character. A ray of hope penetrated her heart, as a ray of sunlight streams into the dungeon of some unhappy captive. Her mind reverted to the journey from Fontainebleau; she saw the king riding beside her carriage, telling her that he loved her, asking for her love in return, requiring her to swear, and himself swearing, too, that never should an evening pass by, if ever a misunderstanding were to arise between them, without a visit, a letter, a sign of some kind being sent, to replace the troubled anxiety of the evening by the calm repose of the night. It was the king who had suggested that, who had imposed a promise upon her, who had himself sworn it also. It was impossible, therefore, she reasoned, that the king should fail in keeping the promise which he had himself exacted from her, unless, indeed, the king were a despot who enforced love as he enforced obedience; unless, too, the king were truly indifferent, that the first obstacle in his way were sufficient to arrest his further progress. The king, that kind protector, who by a word, by a single word, could relieve her distress of mind, the king even joined her persecutors. Oh! his anger could not possibly last. Now that he was alone, he would be suffering all that she herself was a prey to. But he was not tied hand and foot as she was; he could act, could move about, could come to her, while she could do nothing but wait. And the poor girl waited and waited, with breathless anxiety, for she could not believe it possible that the king would not come.

It was now about half-past ten. He would either come to her, or write to her, or send some kind word by M. de St. Aignan. If he were to come, oh! how she would fly to meet him! how she would thrust aside that excess of delicacy which she now discovered was misunderstood! how eagerly she would explain: "It is not I who do not love you, it is the fault of others who will not allow me to love you!" And then it must be confessed that she reflected upon it, and also the more she reflected, Louis appeared to her to be less guilty. In fact, he was ignorant of everything. What must he have thought of the obstinacy with which she remained silent? Impatient and irritable as the king was known to be, it was extraordinary that he had been able to

preserve his temper so long. And yet, had it been her own case, she undoubtedly would not have acted in such a manner; she would have understood everything, have guessed everything. Yes, but she was nothing but a poor, simple-minded girl, and not a great and powerful monarch. Oh! if he did but come, if he would but come! how eagerly she would forgive him for all he had just made her suffer! how much more tenderly she would love him because she had so suffered! And so she sat, with her head bent forward in eager expectation toward the door, her lips slightly parted, as if—and Heaven forgive her for the thought she mentally exclaimed—they were awaiting the kiss which the king's lips had in the morning so sweetly indicated when he pronounced the word *love!* If the king did not come, at least he would write; it was a second chance—a chance less delightful, certainly, than the other, but which would show an affection just as strong, but only more timorous in its nature. Oh! how she would devour his letter, how eager she would be to answer it; and when the messenger who had brought it had left her, how she would kiss, read over and over again, press upon her heart the happy paper which would have brought her ease of mind, tranquillity, and perfect happiness! At all events, if the king did not come; if, however, the king did not write, he could not do otherwise than send St. Aignan, or St. Aignan could not do otherwise than come of his own accord. Even if it were a third person, how openly she would speak to him; the royal presence would not be there to freeze her words upon her tongue, and then no suspicious feeling would remain a moment longer in the king's heart.

Everything with La Valliere, heart and look, body and mind, was concentrated in eager expectation. She said to herself that there was an hour left in which to indulge hope; that until midnight had struck, the king might come, or write, or send; that at midnight only would every expectation be useless, every hope lost. Whenever there was any noise in the palace the poor girl fancied she was the cause of it; whenever she heard any one pass in the courtyard below she imagined they were messengers of the king coming to her. Eleven o'clock struck; then a quarter-past eleven; then half-past. The minutes dragged slowly on in this anxiety, and yet they seemed to pass far too quickly. And now it struck a quarter to twelve. Midnight, midnight was near, the last, the final hope which remained came in its turn. With the last stroke of the

clock the last ray of light seemed to fade away, and with the last ray, so faded her final hope. And so, the king himself had deceived her; it was he who had been the first to fail in keeping the oath which he had sworn that very day; twelve hours only between his oath and his perjured vow; it was not long, certainly, to have preserved the illusion. And so, not only did the king not love her, but still more he despised her whom every one overwhelmed; he despised her to the extent even of abandoning her to the shame of an expulsion which was equivalent to having an ignominious sentence passed upon her; and yet it was he, the king himself, who was the first cause of this ignominy. A bitter smile, the only symptom of anger which during this long conflict had passed across the victim's angelic face, appeared upon her lips. What, in fact, now remained on earth for her, after the king was lost to her? Nothing. But Heaven still remained, and her thoughts flew thither. She prayed that the proper course for her to follow might be suggested. "It is from Heaven," she thought, "that I do expect everything; it is from Heaven I ought to expect everything." And she looked at her crucifix with a devotion full of tender love.

"There," she said, "hangs before me a Master who never forgets and never abandons those who do not abandon and who do not forget Him; it is to Him alone that we must sacrifice ourselves."

And, thereupon, could any one have gazed into the recesses of that chamber, they would have seen the poor despairing girl adopt a final resolution, and determine upon one last plan in her mind. Thereupon, and as her knees were no longer able to support her, she gradually sank down upon the *priedieu*, and with her head pressed against the wooden cross, her eyes fixed, and her respiration short and quick, she watched for the earliest rays of approaching daylight. At two o'clock in the morning she was still in the same bewilderment of mind, or rather, in the same ecstasy of feeling. Her thoughts had almost ceased to hold any communion with the things of this world. And when she saw the violet tints of early dawn visible upon the roofs of the palace, and vaguely revealing the outlines of the ivory cross which she held embraced, she rose from the ground with a new-born strength, kissed the feet of the divine martyr, descended the staircase leading from the room, and wrapped herself from head to foot in a mantle as she went along. She reached the wicket at the very mo

ment the guard of musketeers opened the gate to admit the first relief-guard belonging to one of the Swiss regiments. And then, gliding behind the soldiers, she reached the street before the officer in command of the patrol had even thought of asking who the young girl was who was making her escape from the palace at so early an hour.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE FLIGHT.

La Valliere followed the patrol as it left the courtyard. The patrol bent its steps toward the right, by the Rue St. Honoré, and mechanically La Valliere went to the left. Her resolution was taken—her determination fixed. She wished to betake herself to the convent of the Carmelites at Chaillot, the superior of which enjoyed a reputation for severity which made the worldly minded people of the court tremble. La Valliere had never seen Paris—she had never gone out on foot, and so would have been unable to find her way even had she been in a calmer frame of mind than was then the case, and this may explain why she ascended instead of descending the Rue St. Honoré. Her only thought was to get away from the Palais Royal, and this she was doing; she had heard it said that Chaillot looked out upon the Seine, and she accordingly directed her steps toward the Seine. She took the Rue du Coq, and not being able to cross the Louvre, bore toward the church of St. Germain l'Auxerrois, and proceeded along the site of the colonnade which was subsequently built there by Perrault. In a very short time she reached the quays. Her steps were rapid and agitated; she scarcely felt the weakness which reminded her of having sprained her foot when very young, and which obliged her to limp slightly. At any other hour in the day her countenance would have awakened the suspicions of the least clear-sighted persons, or have attracted the attention of the most indifferent passers-by. But at half-past two in the morning the streets of Paris are almost, if not quite, deserted, and scarcely any one is to be seen but the hard-working artisan on his way to earn his daily bread, or the dangerous idlers of the streets, who are returning to their homes after a night of riot and debauchery; for the former the day was beginning, for the latter it was just closing. La Valliere was afraid of those faces, in which

her ignorance of Parisian types did not permit her to distinguish the type of probity from that of dishonesty. The appearance of misery alarmed her, and all whom she met seemed wretched and miserable. Her toilet, which was the same she had worn during the previous evening, was elegant even in its careless disorder; for it was the one in which she had presented herself to the queen-mother; and, moreover, when she drew aside the mantle which covered her face, in order to enable her to see the way she was going, her pallor and her beautiful eyes spoke an unknown language to the men she met, and, ignorantly, the poor fugitive seemed to invite the brutal remarks of the one class, or to appeal to the compassion of the other. La Valliere still walked on in the same way, breathless and hurried, until she reached the top of the Place de Grève. She stopped from time to time, placed her hand upon her heart, leaned against a wall until she could breathe freely again, and then continued her course more rapidly than before. On reaching the Place de Grève, La Valliere suddenly came upon a group of three drunken men, reeling and staggering along, who were just leaving a boat, which they had made fast to the quay; the boat was freighted with wines, and it was apparent that they had done complete justice to the merchandise. They were singing their convivial exploits in three different keys, when suddenly, as they reached the end of the railing leading down to the quay, they found an obstacle in their path in the shape of this young girl. La Valliere stopped; while they, on their side, at the appearance of the young girl dressed in court costume, also halted, and, seizing one another by the hand, they surrounded La Valliere, singing:

"Oh! you who sadly are wandering alone,
Come, come, and laugh with us."

La Valliere at once understood that the men were addressing her, and wished to prevent her passing; she tried to do so several times, but all her efforts were useless. Her limbs failed her; she felt she was on the point of falling, and uttered a cry of terror. At the same moment the circle which surrounded her was suddenly broken through in a most violent manner. One of her insulters was knocked to the left, another fell rolling over and over to the right, close to the water's edge, while the third could hardly keep his feet. An officer of the musketeers stood face to face with the young girl, with threatening brow and his hand raised to carry out his threat. The drunken fellows, at the

sight of the uniform, made their escape with all dispatch, and the greater for the proof of strength which the wearer of the uniform had just afforded them.

"Is it possible," exclaimed the musketeer, "that it can be Mademoiselle de la Valliere?"

La Valliere, bewildered by what had just happened, and confounded by hearing her name pronounced, looked up and recognized D'Artagnan.

"Oh, Monsieur d'Artagnan! it is indeed I;" and at the same moment she seized hold of his arm. "You will protect me, will you not?" she added, in a tone of entreaty.

"Most certainly I will protect you; but, in Heaven's name, where are you going at this hour?"

"I am going to Chaillot."

"You're going to Chaillot by the way of La Rapée? Why, mademoiselle, you are turning your back to it."

"In that case, monsieur, be kind enough to put me in the right way, and to go with me a short distance."

"Most willingly."

"But how does it happen that I have found you here? By what merciful direction were you so near at hand to come to my assistance? I almost seem to be dreaming, or to be losing my senses."

"I happened to be here, mademoiselle, because I have a house in the Place de Grève, at the sign of the Notre Dame, the rent of which I went to receive yesterday, and where I, in fact, passed the night. And I also wished to be at the palace early, for the purpose of inspecting my posts."

"Thank you," said La Valliere.

"That is what *I* was doing," said D'Artagnan to himself; "but what was *she* doing, and why was she going to Chaillot at such an hour?"

And he offered her his arm, which she took, and began to walk with increased precipitation, which concealed, however, a great weakness. D'Artagnan perceived it, and proposed to La Valliere that she should take a little rest, which she refused.

"You are ignorant, perhaps, where Chaillot is?" inquired D'Artagnan.

"Quite so."

"It is a great distance."

"That matters very little."

"It is, at least, a league."

"I can walk it."

D'Artagnan did not reply; he could tell, merely by the

tone of a voice, when a resolution was real or not. He rather bore along than accompanied La Valliere, until they perceived the elevated ground of Chaillot.

"What house are you going to, mademoiselle?" inquired D'Artagnan.

"To the Carmelites, monsieur."

"To the Carmelites?" repeated D'Artagnan, in amazement.

"Yes; and since Heaven has directed you toward me to give me your support on my road, accept both my thanks and my adieus."

"To the Carmelites! Your adieus! Are you going to become a nun?" exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"Yes, monsieur."

"What, you!!!"

There was in this "you," which we have marked by three notes of exclamation, in order to render it as expressive as possible—there was, we repeat, in this "you" a complete poem; it recalled to La Valliere her old recollections of Blois, and her new recollections of Fontainebleau; it said to her, "*You*, who might be happy with Raoul; *you*, who might be powerful with Louis; *you* about to become a nun!"

"Yes, monsieur," she said. "I am going to devote myself to the service of Heaven, and to renounce the old world altogether."

"But are you not mistaken with regard to your vocation —are you not mistaken in supposing it to be the will of Heaven?"

"No; since Heaven has been pleased to throw you in my way. Had it not been for you, I should certainly have sunk from fatigue on the road; and since Heaven, I repeat, has thrown you in my way, it is because it has willed that I should carry out my intention."

"Oh!" said D'Artagnan doubtingly, "that is a rather subtle distinction, I think."

"Whatever it may be," returned the young girl, "I have acquainted you with the steps I have taken, and with my fixed resolution. And now I have one last favor to ask of you, even while I return you my thanks. The king is entirely ignorant of my flight from the Palais Royal, and is ignorant also of what I am about to do."

"The king ignorant, you say!" exclaimed D'Artagnan. "Take care, mademoiselle; you are not aware of what you are doing. No one ought to do anything with which the king is unacquainted, especially those who belong to the court."

"I no longer belong to the court, monsieur."

D'Artagnan looked at the young girl with increasing astonishment.

"Do not be uneasy, monsieur," she continued; "I have well calculated everything, and, were it not so, it would now be too late to reconsider my resolution—it is decided."

"Well, mademoiselle, what do you wish me to do?"

"In the name of that sympathy which misfortune inspires, by your generous feeling, and by your honor as a gentleman, I entreat you to swear to me one thing."

"Name it."

"Swear to me, Monsieur d'Artagnan, that you will not tell the king that you have seen me, and that I am at the Carmelites."

"I will not swear that," said D'Artagnan, shaking his head.

"Why?"

"Because I know the king, I know you, I know myself even, nay, the whole human race, too well; no, no, I will not swear that!"

"In that case," cried La Valliere, with an energy of which one would hardly have thought her capable, "instead of the blessing which I should have implored for you until my dying day, I will invoke a curse, for you are rendering me the most miserable creature that ever lived."

We have already observed that D'Artagnan could easily recognize the accents of truth and sincerity, and he could not resist this last appeal. He saw by her face how bitterly she suffered from a feeling of degradation; he remarked her trembling limbs, how her whole slight and delicate frame was violently agitated by some internal struggle, and clearly perceived that resistance might be fatal.

"I will do as you wish, then," he said. "Be satisfied, mademoiselle, I will say nothing to the king."

"Oh! thanks, thanks!" exclaimed La Valliere; "you are the most generous man breathing."

And in her extreme delight she seized hold of D'Artagnan's hands and pressed them between her own. D'Artagnan, who felt himself quite overcome, said:

"This is touching, upon my word! she begins where others leave off."

And La Valliere, who, in the extremity of her distress, had sunk down upon the ground, rose and walked toward the convent of the Carmelites, which could now, in the dawning light, be perceived just before them. D'Artagnan

followed her at a distance. The entrance-door was half open; she glided in like a shadow, and thanking D'Artagnan by a parting gesture, disappeared from his sight. When D'Artagnan found himself quite alone he reflected profoundly upon what had just taken place.

"Upon my word," he said, "this looks very much like what is called a false position. To keep such a secret as that is to keep a burning coal in one's breeches-pocket, and trust that it may not burn the stuff. And yet, not to keep it when I have sworn to do so, is dishonorable. It generally happens that some bright idea or other occurs to me as I am going along; but I am very much mistaken if I shall not, now, have to go a long way in order to find the solution of this affair. Yes, but which way to go? Oh! toward Paris, of course; that is the best way, after all. Only one must make haste, and in order to make haste four legs are better than two, and I, unhappily, have only two. 'A horse, a horse,' as I heard them say at the theater in London, 'my kingdom for a horse!' And, now I think of it, it need not cost me so much as that, for at the Barriere de la Conference there is a guard of musketeers, and instead of the one horse I need, I shall find ten there."

So, in pursuance of this resolution, which he had adopted with his usual rapidity, D'Artagnan immediately turned his back upon the heights of Chaillot, reached the guardhouse, took the fastest horse he could find there, and was at the palace in less than ten minutes. It was striking five as he reached the Palais Royal. The king, he was told, went to bed at his usual hour, after having been engaged with M. Colbert, and, in all probability, was still fast asleep.

"Come," said D'Artagnan, "she spoke the truth, and the king is ignorant of everything; if he only knew one-half of what has happened, the Palais Royal by this time would be turned upside down."

CHAPTER XXVII.

SHOWING HOW LOUIS, ON HIS SIDE, HAD PASSED THE TIME FROM TEN TO HALF-PAST TWELVE AT NIGHT.

When the king left the apartment of the maids of honor he found Colbert awaiting him to receive his directions with regard to the next day's ceremony, as the king was then to receive the Dutch and Spanish ambassadors. Louis

XIV. had serious causes of dissatisfaction with the Dutch; the States had already been guilty of many mean shifts and evasions with France, and without perceiving or without caring about the chances of a rupture, they again abandoned the alliance with his most Christian majesty, for the purpose of entering into all kinds of plots with Spain. Louis XIV., at his accession, that is to say, at the death of Cardinal Mazarin, had found this political question roughly sketched out; the solution was difficult for a young man, but as, at that time, the king represented the whole nation, anything that the head resolved upon, the body would be found ready to carry out. Any sudden impulse of anger, the reaction of young and hot blood to the brain, would be quite sufficient to change an old form of policy and to create another and new system altogether. The part that diplomaists had to play in those days was that of arranging among themselves the different *coups-d'état* which their sovereign masters might wish to effect. Louis was not in that calm state of mind which could make him capable of determining upon a wise course of policy. Still much agitated from the quarrel he had just had with La Valliere, he walked hastily into his cabinet, exceedingly desirous of finding an opportunity of producing an explosion after he had controlled himself for so long a time. Colbert, as he saw the king enter, knew the position of affairs at a glance, understood the king's intentions, and resolved, therefore, to maneuver a little. When Louis requested to be informed what it would be necessary to say on the morrow, Colbert began by expressing his surprise that his majesty had not been properly informed by M. Fouquet.

"Monsieur Fouquet," he said, "is perfectly acquainted with the whole of this Dutch affair; he receives the dispatches himself, direct."

The king, who was accustomed to hear M. Colbert speak in not overscrupulous terms of M. Fouquet, allowed this remark to pass by unanswered, and merely listened. Colbert noticed the effect it had produced, and hastened to back out, saying that M. Fouquet was not on all occasions as blamable as at the first glance might seem to be the case, inasmuch as at that moment he was greatly occupied. The king looked up.

"What do you allude to?" he said.

"Sire, men are but men, and Monsieur Fouquet has his defects as well as his great qualities."

"Ah, defects! who is without them, Monsieur Colbert?"

"Your majesty is not," said Colbert boldly; for he knew how to convey a good deal of flattery in a light amount of blame, like the arrow which cleaves the air, notwithstanding its weight, thanks to the light feathers which bear it up.

The king smiled.

"What defect has Monsieur Fouquet, then?" he said.

"Still the same, sire; it is said he is in love."

"In love? With whom?"

"I am not quite sure, sire; I have very little to do with matters of gallantry."

"At all events, you know, since you speak of it."

"I have heard a name mentioned."

"Whose?"

"I cannot now remember whose, but I think it is one of madame's maids of honor."

The king started.

"You know more than you like to say, Monsieur Colbert," he murmured.

"I assure you, no, sire."

"At all events, madame's maids of honor are all known, and in mentioning their names to you, you will perhaps recollect the one you allude to."

"No, sire."

"At least try."

"It would be useless, sire. Whenever the name of any lady who runs the risk of being compromised is concerned, my memory is like a coffer of brass, the key of which I have lost."

A dark cloud seemed to pass over the mind as well as across the face of the king; then, wishing to appear as if he were perfect master of himself and of his feelings, he said:

"And now for the affair concerning Holland."

"In the first place, sire, at what hour will your majesty receive the ambassadors?"

"Early in the morning."

"Eleven o'clock?"

"That is too late—say nine o'clock."

"That will be too early, sire."

"For friends, that would be a matter of no importance, one does what one likes with one's friends; but for one's enemies, in that case nothing could be better than if they were to feel hurt. I should not be sorry, I confess, to have to finish altogether with these marsh-birds, who annoy me with their cries."

"It shall be precisely as your majesty desires. At nine

o'clock, therefore, I will give the necessary orders. Is it to be a formal audience?"

"No. I wish to have an explanation with them, and not to imbitter matters, as is always the case when many persons are present; but at the same time, I wish to clear everything with them, in order not to have to begin over again."

"Your majesty will inform me of the persons whom you wish to be present at the reception."

"I will draw out a list of them. Let us speak of the ambassadors. What do they want?"

"Allies with Spain, they gain nothing; allies with France, they lose much."

"How is that?"

"Allied with Spain, they see themselves bounded and protected by the possessions of their allies; they cannot touch them, however anxious they may be to do so. From Antwerp to Rotterdam is but a step, and that by the way of the Scheldt and the Meuse. If they wish to make a bite at the Spanish cake, you, sire, the son-in-law of the King of Spain, could, with your cavalry, go from your dominions to Brussels in a couple of days. Their design is, therefore, only to quarrel so far with you, and only to make you suspect Spain so far as will be sufficient to induce you not to interfere with their own affairs."

"It would be far more simple, I should think," replied the king, "to form a solid alliance with me, by means of which I should gain something, while they would gain everything."

"Not so; for if, by chance, they were to have you, or France, rather, as a boundary, your majesty is not an agreeable neighbor. Young, ardent, war-like, the King of France might inflict some serious mischief on Holland, especially if he were to get near her."

"I perfectly understand, Monsieur Colbert, and you have explained it very clearly; but be good enough to tell me the conclusion you have arrived at."

"Your majesty's own decisions are never deficient in wisdom."

"What will these ambassadors say to me?"

"They will tell your majesty that they are ardently desirous of forming an alliance with you, which will be a falsehood; they will tell Spain that the three powers ought to unite so as to check the prosperity of England, and that will equally be a falsehood; for at present, the natural ally

of your majesty is England, who has ships when you have none; England, who can counteract Dutch influence in India; England, in fact, a monarchical country, to which your majesty is attached by ties of relationship."

"Good; but how would you answer?"

"I should answer, sire, with the greatest possible moderation of tone, that the disposition of Holland does not seem friendly toward the King of France; that the symptoms of public feeling among the Dutch are alarming as regards your majesty; that certain medals have been struck with insulting devices."

"Toward me?" exclaimed the young king excitedly.

"Oh, no, sire, no; insulting is not the word; I was mistaken; I ought to have said immeasurably flattering to the Dutch."

"Oh! if that be so, the pride of the Dutch is a matter of indifference to me," said the king, sighing.

"Your majesty is right, a thousand times right. However, it is never a mistake in politics, your majesty knows better than myself, to be unjust in order to obtain a concession in your own favor. If your majesty were to complain as if your susceptibility were offended, you would stand in a far higher position with them."

"What are those medals you speak of?" inquired Louis; "for if I allude to them I ought to know what to say."

"Upon my word, sire, I cannot very well tell you—some overweeningly conceited device—that is the sense of it; the words have nothing to do with the thing itself."

"Very good; I will mention the word 'medal,' and they can understand it if they like."

"Oh! they will understand without any difficulty. Your majesty can also slip in a few words about certain pamphlets which are being circulated."

"Never! Pamphlets befoul those who write them much more than those against whom they are written. Monsieur Colbert, I thank you; you can leave me now. Do not forget the hour I have fixed, and be there yourself."

"Sire, I await your majesty's list."

"True," returned the king; and he began to meditate; he did not think of the list in the slightest degree.

The clock struck half-past eleven. The king's face revealed a violent conflict between pride and love. The political conversation had dispelled a good deal of the irritation which Louis had felt, and La Valliere's pale, worn features, in his imagination, spoke a very different language to that

of the Dutch medals or the Batavian pamphlets. He sat for ten minutes debating within himself whether he should or should not return to La Valliere; but Colbert having, with some urgency, respectfully requested that the list might be furnished him, the king blushed at thinking of mere matters of affection when matters of business required his attention. He, therefore, dictated: The queen-mother, the queen, madame, Mme. de Motteville, Mme. de Châtillon, Mme. de Noailles; and, for the men, M. le Prince, M. de Grammont, M. de Manicamp, M. de St. Aignan, and the officers on duty.

"The ministers," said Colbert.

"As a matter of course, and the secretaries also."

"Sire, I will leave at once in order to get everything prepared; the orders will be at the different residences tomorrow."

"Say, rather, to-day," replied Louis mournfully, as the clock struck twelve.

It was the very hour when poor La Valliere was almost dying from anguish and bitter suffering. The king's attendants entered, it being the hour of his return to rest; the queen, indeed, had been waiting for more than an hour. Louis, accordingly, retired to his bedroom with a sigh; but as he sighed he congratulated himself on his courage, and applauded himself for having been as firm in love as in affairs of state.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE AMBASSADORS.

D'Artagnan had, with very few exceptions, learned almost all the particulars of what we have just been relating; for among his friends he reckoned all the useful, serviceable people in the royal household—officious attendants who were proud of being recognized by the captain of the musketeers, for the captain's influence was very great; and then, in addition to any ambitious views they may have imagined he could promote, they were proud of being regarded as worth being spoken to by a man as brave as D'Artagnan. In this manner D'Artagnan learned every morning what he had not been able either to see or to ascertain the night before, from the simple fact of his not being ubiquitous; so that, with the information he had been able,

by his own means, to pick up during the day, and with what he had gathered from others, he succeeded in making up a bundle of weapons, which he untied as occasion might require. In this way D'Artagnan's two eyes rendered him the same service as the hundred eyes of Argus. Political secrets, beside revelations, hints, or scraps of conversation dropped by the courtiers on the threshold of the royal antechamber, in this way D'Artagnan managed to ascertain, and to put away everything in the vast and impenetrable tomb of his memory, by the side of those royal secrets so dearly bought and faithfully preserved. He, therefore, knew of the king's interview with Colbert, and of the appointment made for the ambassadors in the morning, and, consequently, he knew that the question of the medals would be brought under debate; and while he was arranging and constructing the conversation upon a few chance words which had reached his ears, he returned to his post in the royal apartments, so as to be there at the very moment the king would awake. It happened that the king woke very early—proving thereby that he, too, on his side, had slept but indifferently. Toward seven o'clock, he half opened his door very gently. D'Artagnan was at his post. His majesty was pale, and seemed wearied; he had not, moreover, quite finished dressing.

"Send for Monsieur de St. Aignan," he said.

St. Aignan very probably awaited a summons, for the messenger, when he reached his apartment, found him already dressed. St. Aignan hastened to the king in obedience to the summons. A moment afterward the king and St. Aignan passed by together, but the king walking first. D'Artagnan went to the window which looked out upon the courtyards; he had no need to put himself to the trouble of watching in what direction the king went, for he had no difficulty in guessing beforehand where his majesty was going. The king, in fact, bent his steps toward the apartments of the maids of honor—a circumstance which in no way astonished D'Artagnan, for he more than suspected, although La Valliere had not breathed a syllable on the subject, that the king had some kind of reparation to make. St. Aignan followed him as he had done the previous evening, rather less uneasy in his mind, though still slightly agitated, for he fervently trusted that at seven o'clock in the morning there might be only himself and the king awake among the august guests at the palace. D'Artagnan stood at the window, careless and perfectly calm in his

manner. One could almost have sworn that he noticed nothing, and was utterly ignorant who were these two hunters after adventures who were passing across the courtyards wrapped up in their cloaks. And yet, all the while that D'Artagnan appeared not to be looking at them at all, he did not for one moment lose sight of them, and while he whistled that old march of the musketeers, which he rarely recalled except under great emergencies, he conjectured and prophesied how terrible would be the storm which would be raised on the king's return. In fact, when the king entered La Valliere's apartment and found the room empty and the bed untouched, he began to be alarmed, and called out to Montalais, who immediately answered the summons; but her astonishment was equal to the king's. All that she could tell his majesty was, that she had fancied she had heard La Valliere weep during a portion of the night, but, knowing that his majesty had returned, she had not dared to inquire what was the matter.

"But," inquired the king, "where do you suppose she is gone to?"

"Sire," replied Montalais, "Louise is of a very sentimental disposition, and as I have often seen her rise at daybreak in order to go out into the garden, she may perhaps be there now."

This appeared probable, and the king immediately ran down the staircase in search of the fugitive. D'Artagnan saw him appear very pale, and talking in an excited manner with his companion as he went toward the gardens, St. Aignan following him, out of breath. D'Artagnan did not stir from the window, but went on whistling, looking as if he saw nothing, and yet seeing everything.

"Come, come," he murmured, when the king disappeared, "his majesty's passion is stronger than I thought; he is now doing, I think, what he never did for Mademoiselle de Mancini."

In a quarter of an hour the king again appeared; he had looked everywhere, was completely out of breath, and, as a matter of course, had not discovered anything. St. Aignan, who still followed him, was fanning himself with his hat, and, in a gasping voice, asking for information about La Valliere from such of the servants as were about, in fact, from every one he met. Among others he came across Manicamp, who had arrived from Fontainebleau by easy stages; for while others had performed the journey in six hours, he had taken twenty-four.

"Have you seen Mademoiselle de la Valliere?" St. Aignan asked him.

Whereupon Manicamp, dreamy and absent as usual, answered, thinking that some one was asking him about De Guiche:

"Thank you, the comte is a little better."

And he continued on his way until he reached the antechamber where D'Artagnan was, and whom he asked to explain how it was the king looked, as he thought, so bewildered; to which D'Artagnan replied that he was quite mistaken, that the king, on the contrary, was as lively and merry as he could possibly be.

In the midst of all this eight o'clock struck. It was usual for the king to take his breakfast at this hour, for the code of etiquette prescribed that the king should always be hungry at eight o'clock. His breakfast was laid upon a small table in his bedroom, and he ate very fast. St. Aignan, of whom he would not lose sight, held his napkin in his hand. He then disposed of several military audiences, during which he dispatched St. Aignan to see what he could find out. Then, still occupied, still full of anxiety, still watching St. Aignan's return, who had sent out his servants in every direction to make inquiries, and who had also gone himself, the hour of nine struck, and the king forthwith passed into his large cabinet.

As the clock was striking nine the ambassadors entered, and as it finished the two queens and madame made their appearance. There were three ambassadors from Holland, and two from Spain. The king glanced at them, and then bowed; and at the same moment St. Aignan entered, an entrance which the king regarded as far more important, in a different sense, however, than that of ambassadors, however numerous they were, and from whatever country they came; and so, setting everything else aside, the king made a sign of interrogation to St. Aignan, which the latter answered by a most decisive negative. The king almost entirely lost his courage; but as the queens, the members of the nobility who were present, and the ambassadors, had their eyes fixed upon him, he overcame his emotion by a violent effort, and invited the latter to speak. Whereupon one of the Spanish deputies made a long oration, in which he boasted the advantages which the Spanish alliance would offer.

The king interrupted him, saying, "Monsieur, I trust that whatever is advantageous for France must be exceedingly advantageous for Spain."

This remark, and particularly the peremptory tone in which it was pronounced, made the ambassadors pale, and brought the color into the cheeks of the two queens, who, being Spanish, felt wounded by this reply in their pride of relationship and nationality.

The Dutch ambassador then began to address himself to the king, and complained of the injurious suspicions which the king exhibited against the government of his country.

The king interrupted him, saying, "It is very singular, monsieur, that you should come with any complaint, when it is I rather who have reason to be dissatisfied; and yet, you see, I do not complain."

"Complain, sire; and in what respect?"

The king smiled bitterly. "Will you blame me, monsieur," he said, "if I should happen to entertain suspicions against a government which authorizes and protects public insulters?"

"Sire!"

"I tell you," resumed the king, exciting himself by a recollection of his own personal annoyance rather than from political grounds, "that Holland is a land of refuge for all who hate me, and especially for all who malign me."

"Oh, sire!"

"You wish for proofs, perhaps? Very good; they can be had easily enough. Whence proceed all those insulting pamphlets which represent me as a monarch without glory and without authority? your printing-presses groan under their number. If my secretaries were here I would mention the titles of the works as well as the names of the printers."

"Sire," replied the ambassador, "a pamphlet can hardly be regarded as the work of a whole nation. Is it just, is it reasonable, that a great and powerful monarch like your majesty should render a whole nation responsible for the crime of a few madmen, who are starving or dying of hunger?"

"That may be the case, I admit. But when the mint at Amsterdam strikes off medals which reflect disgrace upon me, is that also the crime of a few madmen?"

"Medals!" stammered out the ambassador.

"Medals," repeated the king, looking at Colbert.

"Your majesty," the ambassador ventured, "should be quite sure——"

The king still looked at Colbert; but Colbert appeared not to understand him, and maintained an unbroken silence,

notwithstanding the king's repeated hints. D'Artagnan then approached the king, and taking a piece of money out of his pocket, he placed it in the king's hands, saying: "That is the medal your majesty alludes to."

The king looked at it, and with a glance which, ever since he had become his own master, had been always soaring in its gaze, observed an insulting device representing Holland arresting the progress of the sun, with this inscription: "*In conspectu meo stetit sol.*"

"In my presence the sun stands still," exclaimed the king furiously. "Ah! you will hardly deny it now, I suppose."

"And the sun," said D'Artagnan, "is this," as he pointed to the panels of the cabinet, where the sun was brilliantly represented in every direction with this motto, "*Nec pluribus impar.*"

Louis' anger, increased by the bitterness of his own personal sufferings, hardly required this additional circumstance to foment it. Every one saw, from the kindling passion in the king's eyes, that an explosion was most imminent. A look from Colbert kept back the storm from bursting forth. The ambassador ventured to frame excuses by saying that the vanity of nations was a matter of little consequence; that Holland was proud that, with such limited resources, she had maintained her rank as a great nation, even against powerful monarchs, and that if a little smoke had intoxicated his countrymen, the king would be kindly disposed, and would excuse this intoxication. The king seemed as if he would be glad of some one's advice; he looked at Colbert, who remained impassible; then at D'Artagnan, who simply shrugged his shoulders, a movement which was like the opening of the floodgates, whereby the king's anger, which he had restrained for so long a period, now burst forth. As no one knew what direction his anger might take, all preserved a dead silence. The second ambassador took advantage of it to begin his excuses also. While he was speaking, and while the king, who had again gradually returned to his own personal reflections, listened to the voice, full of nervous anxiety, with the air of an absent man listening to the murmuring of a cascade, D'Artagnan, on whose left hand St. Aignan was standing, approached the latter, and, in a voice which was loud enough to reach the king's ears, said: "Have you heard the news?"

"What news?" said St. Aignan.

"About La Valliere."

The king started, and involuntarily advanced a step nearer to them.

"What has happened to La Valliere?" inquired St. Aignan, in a tone which can very easily be imagined.

"Ah! poor girl! she is going to take the veil."

"The veil!" exclaimed St. Aignan.

"The veil!" cried the king, in the midst of the ambassador's discourse; but then, mindful of the rules of etiquette, he mastered himself, still listening, however, with wrapt attention.

"What order?" inquired St. Aignan.

"The Carmelites of Chaillot."

"Who the deuce told you that?"

"She did herself."

"You have seen her, then?"

"Nay, I even went with her to the Carmelites."

The king did not lose a syllable of this conversation; and again he could hardly control his feelings.

"But what was the cause of her flight?" inquired St. Aignan.

"Because the poor girl was driven away from the court yesterday," replied D'Artagnan.

He had no sooner said this than the king, with an authoritative gesture, said to the ambassador, "Enough, monsieur, enough." Then, advancing toward the captain, he exclaimed: "Who says that La Valliere is going to take the religious vows?"

"Monsieur d'Artagnan," answered the favorite.

"Is it true what you say?" said the king, turning toward the musketeer.

"As true as truth itself."

The king clinched his hands, and turned pale. "You have something further to add, Monsieur d'Artagnan?" he said.

"I know nothing more, sire."

"You added that Mademoiselle de la Valliere had been driven away from court."

"Yes, sire."

"Is that true, also?"

"Ascertain for yourself, sire."

"And from whom?"

"Oh!" said D'Artagnan, like a man declining to say anything further.

The king almost bounded from his seat, regardless of ambassadors, ministers, courtiers, and politics. The queen-

mother rose; she had heard everything; or, if she had not heard everything, she had guessed it. Madame, almost fainting from anger and fear, endeavored to rise as the queen-mother had done; but she sank down again upon her chair, which by an instinctive movement she made roll back a few paces.

"Gentlemen," said the king, "the audience is over; I will communicate my answer, or rather my will, to Spain and to Holland;" and, with a proud, imperious gesture, he dismissed the ambassadors.

"Take care, my son," said the queen-mother indignantly, "you are hardly master of yourself, I think."

"Ah, madame!" returned the young lion, with a terrible gesture, "if I am not master of myself, I will be, I promise you, of those who do me outrage. Come with me, Monsieur d'Artagnan, come." And he quitted the room in the midst of a general stupefaction and dismay. The king hastily descended the staircase, and was about to cross the courtyard.

"Sire," said D'Artagnan, "your majesty mistakes the way."

"No; I am going to the stables."

"That is useless, sire, for I have horses ready for your majesty."

The king's only answer was a look, but this look promised more than the ambition of three D'Artagnans could have dared to hope.

CHAPTER XXIX.

CHAILLOT.

Although they had not been summoned, Manicamp and Malicorne had followed the king and D'Artagnan. They were both exceedingly intelligent men; except that Malicorne was too precipitate, owing to his ambition; while Manicamp was frequently too tardy, owing to his idleness. On this occasion, however, they arrived at precisely the proper moment. Five horses were waiting in readiness. Two were seized upon by the king and D'Artagnan, two others by Manicamp and Malicorne, while a groom belonging to the stables mounted the fifth. The whole cavalcade set off at a gallop. D'Artagnan had been very careful in his selection of the horses; they were the very animals for dis-

tressed lovers—horses which did not simply run, but flew. Within ten minutes after their departure, the cavalcade, amid a cloud of dust, arrived at Chaillot. The king literally threw himself off his horse; but notwithstanding the rapidity with which he accomplished this maneuver, he found D'Artagnan already holding his stirrup. With a sign of acknowledgment to the musketeer, he threw the bridle to the groom, and darted into the vestibule, violently pushed open the door, and entered the reception-room. Manicamp, Malicorne, and the groom remained outside, D'Artagnan alone following him. When he entered the reception-room the first object which met his gaze was Louise herself, not simply on her knees, but lying at the foot of a large stone crucifix. The young girl was stretched upon the damp flagstones, scarcely visible in the gloom of the apartment, which was lighted only by means of a narrow window protected by bars and completely shaded by creeping plants. She was alone, inanimate, cold as the stone to which she was clinging. When the king saw her in this state he thought she was dead, and uttered a loud cry, which made D'Artagnan hurry into the room. The king had already passed one of his arms round her body, and D'Artagnan assisted him in raising the poor girl, whom the torpor of death seemed already to have taken possession of. D'Artagnan seized hold of the alarm-bell, and rang with all his might. The Carmelite sisters immediately hastened at the summons, and uttered loud exclamations of alarm and indignation at the sight of the two men holding a woman in their arms. The superior also hurried to the scene of action; but far more a creature of the world than any of the female members of the court, notwithstanding her austerity of manners, she recognized the king at the first glance, by the respect which those present exhibited for him, as well as by the imperious and authoritative way in which he had thrown the whole establishment into confusion. As soon as she saw the king, she retired to her own apartments, in order to avoid compromising her dignity. But by one of the nuns she sent various cordials, Hungary water, etc., etc., and ordered that all the doors should be immediately closed, a command which was just in time, for the king's distress was fast becoming of a most clamorous and despairing character. He had almost decided to send for his own physician, when La Valliere exhibited signs of returning animation. The first object which met her gaze, as she opened her eyes, was the king at her feet; in all probability she did

not recognize him, for she uttered a deep sigh full of anguish and distress. Louis fixed his eyes devouringly upon her face; and when, in the course of a few moments, she recognized the king, she endeavored to tear herself from his embrace.

"Oh, heavens!" she murmured, "is not the sacrifice yet made?"

"No, no!" exclaimed the king, "and it shall not be made, I swear."

Notwithstanding her weakness and utter despair, she rose from the ground, saying, "It must be made, however; it must be; so do not stay me in my purpose."

"I leave you to sacrifice yourself! I! never, never!" exclaimed the king.

"Well," murmured D'Artagnan, "I may as well go now. As soon as they begin to speak we may as well save their having any listeners." And he quitted the room, leaving the two lovers alone.

"Sire," continued La Valliere, "not another word, I implore you. Do not destroy the only future I can hope for —my salvation; do not destroy the glory and brightness of your own future for a mere caprice."

"A caprice!" cried the king.

"Oh, sire! it is now, only, that I can see clearly into your heart."

"You, Louise, what mean you?"

"An inexplicable impulse, foolish and unreasonable in its nature, may momentarily appear to offer a sufficient excuse for your conduct; but there are duties imposed upon you which are incompatible with your regard for a poor girl such as I am. So, forget me."

"I forget you!"

"You have already done so."

"Rather would I die."

"You cannot love one whose peace of mind you hold so lightly, and whom you so cruelly abandoned, last night, to the bitterness of death."

"What can you mean? Explain yourself, Louise."

"What did you ask me yesterday morning? To love you. What did you promise me in return? Never to let midnight pass without offering me an opportunity of reconciliation, whenever your anger might be aroused against me."

"Oh! forgive me, Louise, forgive me! I was almost mad from jealousy."

"Jealousy is an unworthy thought, sire. You may be-

come jealous again, and will end by killing me. Be merciful, then, and leave me now to die."

"Another word, mademoiselle, in that strain, and you will see me expire at your feet."

"No, no, sire, I am better acquainted with my own demerits; and believe me, that to sacrifice yourself for one whom all despise would be needless."

"Give me the names of those you have cause to complain of."

"I have no complaints, sire, to prefer against any one; no one but myself to accuse. Farewell, sire; you are compromising yourself in speaking to me in such a manner."

"Oh! be careful, Louise, in what you say; for you are reducing me to the very depths of despair."

"Oh! sire, sire, leave me to the protection of Heaven, I implore you."

"No, no; Heaven itself shall not tear you from me."

"Save me, then," cried the poor girl, "from those determined and pitiless enemies who are thirsting to destroy my very life and honor too. If you have courage enough to love me, show at least that you have power enough to defend me. But no; she whom you say you love, others insult and mock and drive shamelessly away." And the gentle-hearted girl, forced by her own bitter distress to accuse others, wrung her hands in an uncontrollable agony of tears.

"You have been driven away!" exclaimed the king. "This is the second time I have heard that said."

"I have been driven away with shame and ignominy, sire. You see, then, that I have no other protector but Heaven, no consolation but prayer, and this cloister is my only refuge."

"My palace, my whole court, shall be yours. Oh! fear nothing further now, Louise; those, be they men or women, who yesterday drove you away, shall to-morrow tremble before you—to-morrow, do I say? nay, this very day have I already shown my displeasure—have already threatened. It is in my power, even now, to hurl the thunderbolt which I have hitherto withheld. Louise, Louise, you shall be cruelly revenged; tears of blood shall repay you for the tears you have shed. Give me only the names of your enemies."

"Never, never!"

"How can I show any anger, then?"

"Sire, those upon whom your anger would have to fall would force you to draw back your hand upraised to punish."

"Oh! you do not know me," cried the king, exasperated. "Rather than draw back I would sacrifice my kingdom, and would curse my family. Yes, I would strike until this arm had utterly annihilated all those who had ventured to make themselves the enemies of the gentlest and best of creatures."

And as he said these words, Louis struck his fist violently against the oaken wainscoting with a force which alarmed La Valliere; for his anger, owing to his unbounded power, had something imposing and threatening in it, and, like the tempest, might be mortal in its effects. She, who thought that her own sufferings could not be surpassed, was overwhelmed by a suffering which revealed itself by menace and by violence.

"Sire," she said, "for the last time I implore you to leave me; already do I feel strengthened by the calm seclusion of this asylum, and the protection of Heaven has reassured me; for all the petty human meannesses of this world are forgotten beneath the divine protection. Once more, then, sire, and for the last time, I again implore you to leave me."

"Confess, rather," cried Louis, "that you have never loved me; admit that my humility and repentance are flattering to your pride; but that my distress affects you not; that the king of this wide realm is no longer regarded as a lover whose tenderness of devotion is capable of working out your happiness; but that he is a despot whose caprice has utterly destroyed in your heart the very last fiber of human feeling. Do not say you are seeking Heaven, say, rather, that you are fleeing the king."

Louise's heart wrung within her as she listened to his passionate utterance, which made the fever of passion course through every vein in her body. "But did you not hear me say that I have been driven away, scorned, despised?"

"I will make you the most respected, and most adored, and the most envied of my whole court."

"Prove to me that you have not ceased to love me."

"In what way?"

"By leaving me."

"I will prove it to you by never leaving you again."

"But do you imagine, sire, that I shall allow that; do you imagine that I will let you come to an open rupture with every member of your family; do you imagine that, for my sake, you could abandon mother, wife, and sister?"

"Ah! you have named them, then, at last; it is they,

then, who have wrought this grievous injury? By the heaven above us, then, upon them shall my anger fall."

"That is the reason why the future terrifies me, why I refuse everything, why I do not wish you to revenge me. Tears enough have already been shed, sufficient sorrow and affliction have already been occasioned. I, at least, will never be the cause of sorrow, or affliction, or distress, to whomsoever it may be, for I have mourned and suffered and wept too much myself."

"And do you count my sufferings, my distress, and my tears, as nothing?"

"In Heaven's name, sire, do not speak to me in that manner. I need all my courage to enable me to accomplish the sacrifice."

"Louise, Louise, I implore you! whatever you desire, whatever you command, whether vengeance or forgiveness, your slightest wish shall be obeyed, but do not abandon me."

"Alas! sire, we must part."

"You do not love me, then?"

"Heaven knows I do!"

"It is false, Louise; it is false!"

"Oh! sire, if I did not love you, I should let you do what you please; I should let you revenge me, in return for the insult which has been inflicted on me; I should accept the sweet triumph to my pride which you propose; and yet you cannot deny that I reject even the sweet compensation which your affection affords, that affection which for me is life itself, for I wished to die when I thought that you loved me no longer."

"Yes, yes; I now know, I now perceive it; you are the holiest, the best, the purest of women. There is no one so worthy as yourself, not alone of my own respect and devotion, but also of the respect and devotion of all who surround me; and therefore shall no one be loved like yourself; no one shall ever possess the influence over me that you wield. You wish me to be calm, to forgive; be it so, you shall find me perfectly unmoved. You wish to reign by gentleness and clemency, I will be clement and gentle. Dictate for me the conduct you wish me to adopt, and I will obey blindly."

"In Heaven's name, no, sire; what am I, a poor girl, to dictate to so great a monarch as yourself?"

"You are my life, the very spirit and principle of my being. Is it not the spirit that rules the body?"

"You love me, then, sire?"

"On my knees, yes; with my hands upraised to you, yes; with all the strength and power of my being, yes; I love you so deeply that I would happily lay down my life for you at your merest wish."

"Oh! sire, now that I know you love me, I have nothing to wish for in the whole world. Give me your hand, sire, and then, farewell. I have enjoyed in this life all the happiness which I was destined to meet with."

"Oh! no, no! your happiness is not a happiness of yesterday, it is of to-day, of to-morrow, ever enduring. The future is yours, everything which is mine is yours too. Away with these ideas of separation, away with these gloomy, despairing thoughts! You will live for me, as I will live for you, Louise." And he threw himself at her feet, embracing her knees with the wildest transports of joy and gratitude.

"Oh! sire, sire! all that is but a wild dream."

"Why, a wild dream?"

"Because I cannot return to the court. Exiled, how can I see you again? Would it not be far better to bury myself in a cloister for the rest of my life, with the rich consolation that your affection gives me, with the latest pulses of your heart beating for me, and your latest confession of attachment still ringing in my ears?"

"Exiled, you!" exclaimed Louis XIV.; "and who dares to exile, let me ask, when I recall?"

"Oh! sire, something which is greater than and superior to kings even—the world and public opinion. Reflect for a moment; you cannot love a woman who has been ignominiously driven away—love one whom your mother has stained with suspicion; one whom your sister has threatened with disgrace; such a woman, indeed, would be unworthy of you."

"Unworthy! one who belongs to me?"

"Yes, sire, precisely on that account; from the very moment she belongs to you, the character of your mistress renders her unworthy."

"You are right, Louise; every shade of delicacy of feeling is yours. Very well, you shall not be exiled."

"Ah! from the tone in which you speak, you have not heard madame, that is very clear."

"I will appeal from her to my mother."

"Again, sire, you have not seen your mother."

"She also? Poor Louise! every one's hand, then, is against you."

"Yes, yes, poor Louise, who was already bending beneath the fury of the storm when you arrived and crushed her beneath the weight of your displeasure."

"Oh! forgive me."

"You will not, I know, be able to make either of them yield; believe me, the evil cannot be repaired, for I will not allow you to use violence or to exercise your authority."

"Very well, Louise; to prove to you how fondly I love you, I will do one thing; I will see madame; I will make her revoke her sentence; I will compel her to do so."

"Compel? Oh! no, no!"

"True; you are right. I will bend her."

Louise shook her head.

"I will entreat her, if it be necessary," said Louis. "Will you believe in my affection after that?"

Louise drew herself up. "Oh, never, never shall you humiliate yourself on my account; sooner, a thousand times, would I die."

Louis reflected, his features assumed a dark expression. "I will love as much as you have loved; I will suffer as keenly as you have suffered; this shall be my expiation in your eyes. Come, mademoiselle, put aside these paltry considerations; let us show ourselves as great as our sufferings, as strong as our affection for each other." And as he said this he took her in his arms, and encircled her waist with both his hands, saying, "My own love! my own dearest and best beloved, follow me."

She made a final effort, in which she concentrated—no longer all her firmness of will, for that had long since been overcome, but all her physical strength. "No!" she replied weakly, "no! no! I should die from shame."

"No; you shall return like a queen. No one knows of your having left—except, indeed, D'Artagnan."

"He has betrayed me, then?"

"In what way?"

"He promised me faithfully——"

"I promised not to say anything to the king," said D'Artagnan, putting in his head through the half-opened door, "and I kept my word; I was speaking to Monsieur de St. Aignan, and it was not my fault if the king overheard me; was it, sire?"

"It is quite true," said the king; "forgive him."

La Valliere smiled, and held out her small white hand to the musketeer.

"Monsieur d'Artagnan," said the king, "be good enough

to see if you can find a carriage for Mademoiselle de la Valliere."

"Sire," said the captain, "the carriage is waiting at the gate."

"You are the most perfect model of thoughtfulness," exclaimed the king.

"You have taken a long time to find it out," muttered D'Artagnan, notwithstanding he was flattered by the praise bestowed upon him.

La Valliere was overcome; after a little further hesitation, she allowed herself to be led away, half-fainting, by her royal lover. But as she was on the point of leaving the room, she tore herself from the king's grasp, and returned to the stone crucifix, which she kissed, saying, "Oh, Heaven; it was Thou who drewest me hither! Thou, who hast rejected me; but Thy grace is infinite. Whenever I shall again return, forget that I have ever separated myself from Thee, for when I return, it will be—never to leave Thee again."

The king could not restrain his emotion, and D'Artagnan, even, was overcome. Louis bore the young girl away, lifted her into the carriage, and directed D'Artagnan to seat himself beside her, while he, mounting his horse, spurred violently toward the Palais Royal, where, immediately on his arrival, he sent to request an audience of madame.

CHAPTER XXX.

MADAME.

From the manner in which the king had dismissed the ambassadors, even the least clear-sighted persons belonging to the court had imagined war would ensue. The ambassadors themselves, but slightly acquainted with the king's domestic disturbances, had interpreted as directed against themselves the celebrated sentence: "If I be not master of myself, I, at least, will be so of those who insult me." Happily for the destinies of France and Holland, Colbert had followed them out of the king's presence for the purpose of explaining matters to them; but the two queens and madame, who were perfectly aware of every particular circumstance that had taken place in their several households,

having heard the remark so full of dark meaning, retired to their own apartments in no little fear and chagrin. Madame, especially, felt that the royal anger might fall upon her, and, as she was brave and exceedingly proud, instead of seeking support and encouragement from the queen-mother, she had returned to her own apartments, if not without some uneasiness, at least without any intention of avoiding the encounter. Anne of Austria, from time to time at frequent intervals, sent messages to learn if the king had returned. The silence which the whole palace preserved upon the matter, and upon Louise's disappearance, was indicative of a long train of misfortunes to all those who knew the haughty and irritable humor of the king. But madame remained perfectly unmoved in spite of all the flying rumors, shut herself up in her apartments, sent for Montalais, and, with a voice as calm as she could possibly command, desired her to relate all she knew about the event itself. At the moment that the eloquent Montalais was concluding, with all kinds of oratorical precautions, and was recommending, if not in actual language, at least in spirit, that she should show a forbearance toward La Valliere, M. Malicorne made his appearance to beg an audience of madame, on behalf of his majesty. Montalais' worthy friend bore upon upon his countenance all the signs of the very liveliest emotion. It was impossible to be mistaken; the interview which the king requested would be one of the most interesting chapters in the history of the hearts of kings and of men. Madame was disturbed by her brother-in-law's arrival; she did not expect it so soon, nor had she, indeed, expected any direct step on Louis' part. Besides, all women who wage war successfully by indirect means are invariably neither very skillful nor very strong when it becomes a question of accepting a pitched battle. Madame, however, was not one who ever drew back; she had the very opposite defect or qualification, in whichever light it may be considered; she took an exaggerated view of what constituted real courage; and therefore the king's message, of which Malicorne had been the bearer, was regarded by her as the trumpet proclaiming the commencement of hostilities. She, therefore, boldly accepted the gage of battle. Five minutes afterward the king ascended the staircase. His color was heightened from having ridden hard. His dusty and disordered clothes formed a singular contrast with the fresh and perfectly arranged toilet of madame, who, notwithstanding her rouge, turned pale as the king

entered her room. Louis lost no time in approaching the object of his visit; he sat down, and Montalais disappeared.

"My dear sister," said the king, "you are aware that Mademoiselle de la Valliere fled from her own room this morning, and that she has retired to a cloister, overwhelmed by grief and despair." As he pronounced these words, the king's voice was singularly moved.

"Your majesty was the first to inform me of it," replied madame.

"I should have thought that you might have learned it this morning, during the reception of the ambassadors," said the king.

"From your emotion, sire, I imagined that something extraordinary had happened, but without knowing what."

The king, with his usual frankness, went straight to the point. "Why have you sent Mademoiselle de la Valliere away?"

"Because I had reason to be dissatisfied with her conduct," she replied dryly.

The king became crimson, and his eyes kindled with a fire which it required all madame's courage to support. He mastered his anger, however, and continued, "A stronger reason than that is surely requisite, for one so good and kind as you are to turn away and dishonor, not only the young girl herself, but every member of her family as well. You know that the whole city has its eyes fixed upon the conduct of the female portion of the court. To dismiss a maid of honor is to attribute a crime to her—at the very least, a fault. What crime, what fault, has Mademoiselle de la Valliere been guilty of?"

"Since you constitute yourself the protector of Mademoiselle de la Valliere," replied madame coldly, "I will give you those explanations which I should have a perfect right to withhold from every one."

"Even from the king!" exclaimed Louis, as, with a sudden gesture, he covered his head with his hat.

"You have called me your sister," said madame, "and I am in my own apartments."

"It matters not," said the youthful monarch, ashamed at having been hurried away by his anger; "neither you, nor any one else in this kingdom, can assert a right to withhold an explanation in my presence."

"Since that is the way you regard it," said madame, in a hoarse, angry tone of voice, "all that remains for me to do is to bow submission to your majesty, and to be silent."

"No; let there be no equivocation between us."

"The protection with which you surround Mademoiselle de la Valliere does not impose any respect."

"No equivocation, I repeat; you are perfectly aware that, as the head of the nobility of France, I am accountable to all for the honor of every family. You dismiss Mademoiselle de la Valliere, or whoever else it may be——"

Madame shrugged her shoulders.

"Or whoever else it may be, I repeat," continued the king; "and as, in acting in that manner, you cast a dishonorable reflection upon that person, I ask you for an explanation, in order that I may confirm or annul the sentence."

"Annul my sentence!" exclaimed madame haughtily. "What! when I have discharged one of my attendants, do you order me to take her back again?"

The king remained silent.

"This would cease to be an excess of power merely, sire; it would be indecorous and unseemly."

"Madame!"

"As a woman, I should revolt against an abuse so insulting to me; I should no longer be able to regard myself as a princess of your blood, a daughter of a monarch; I should be the meanest of creatures, more humbled and disgraced than the servant I had sent away."

The king rose from his seat in anger. "It cannot be a heart," he cried, "you have beating in your bosom; if you act in such a way with me, I may have reason to act with similar severity."

It sometimes happens that in a battle a chance ball may reach its mark. The observation which the king had made, without any particular intention, struck madame home, and staggered her for a moment; some day or other she might indeed have reason to dread reprisals. "At all events, sire," she said, "explain what you require."

"I ask, madame, what has Mademoiselle de la Valliere done to warrant your conduct toward her?"

"She is the most cunning fomenter of intrigues I know; she was the occasion of two personal friends engaging in mortal combat; and has made people talk of her in such shameless terms that the whole court is indignant at the mere sound of her name."

"She! she!" cried the king.

"Under her soft and hypocritical manner," continued madame, "she hides a disposition full of foul and dark deceit."

"She!"

"You may possibly be deceived, sire, but I know her right well; she is capable of creating dispute and misunderstanding between the most affectionate relatives and the most intimate friends. You see that she has already sown discord between us two."

"I do assure you—" said the king.

"Sire, look well into the case as it stood; we were living on the most friendly understanding, and by the artfulness of her tales and complaints, she has set your majesty against me."

"I swear to you," said the king, "that on no occasion has a bitter word ever passed her lips; I swear that, even in my wild bursts of passion, she would never allow me to menace any one; and I swear, too, that you do not possess a more devoted and respectful friend than she is."

"Friend!" said madame, with an expression of supreme disdain.

"Take care, madame!" said the king; "you forget that you now understand me, and that from this moment everything is equalized. Mademoiselle de la Valliere will be whatever I may choose her to become; and to-morrow, if I were to determine to do so, I could seat her on a throne."

"She will not have been born to a throne, at least, and whatever you may do can affect the future alone, but cannot affect the past."

"Madame, toward you I have shown every kind consideration, and every eager desire to please you; do not remind me that I am master here."

"That is the second time, sire, that you have made that remark, and I have already informed you I am ready to submit."

"In that case, then, you will confer upon me the favor of receiving Mademoiselle de la Valliere back again."

"For what purpose, sire, since you have a throne to bestow upon her? I am too insignificant to protect so exalted a personage."

"Nay, a truce to this bitter and disdainful spirit. Grant me her forgiveness."

"Never!"

"You drive me, then, to open warfare in my own family."

"I, too, have my own family, where I can find refuge."

"Do you mean that as a threat, and could you forget yourself so far? Do you believe that if you push the affront to that extent, your family would encourage you?"

"I hope, sire, that you will not force me to take any step which would be unworthy of my rank?"

"I hoped that you would remember a friendship, and that you would treat me as a brother."

Madame paused for a moment. "I do not disown you for a brother," she said, "in refusing your majesty an injustice."

"An injustice!"

"Oh! sire, if I informed others of La Valliere's conduct; if the queen knew——"

"Come, come, Henriette, let your heart speak; remember that you have loved me; remember, too, that human hearts should be as merciful as the heart of a sovereign master. Do not be inflexible with others; forgive La Valliere."

"I cannot; she has offended me."

"But for my sake."

"Sire, for your sake I would do anything in the world, except that."

"You will drive me to despair—you compel me to turn to the last resource of weak people, and seek counsel of my angry and wrathful disposition."

"I advise you to be reasonable."

"Reasonable! I can be so no longer."

"Nay, sire; I pray you——"

"For pity's sake, Henriette; it is the first time I have entreated any one, and I have no hope in any one but in you."

"Oh, sire! you are weeping."

"From rage, from humiliation. That I, the king, should have been obliged to descend to entreaty. I shall hate this moment during my whole life. You have made me suffer in one moment more distress and more degradation of feeling than I could have anticipated in the greatest extremity in life." And the king rose and gave free vent to his tears, which, in fact, were tears of anger and shame.

Madame was not touched exactly—for the best women, when their pride is hurt, are without pity; but she was afraid that the tears the king was shedding might possibly carry away every soft and tender feeling in his heart. "Give what commands you please, sire," she said; "and since you prefer my humiliation to your own—although mine is public and yours has been witnessed but by myself alone—speak, I will obey your majesty."

"No, no, Henriette!" exclaimed Louis, transported with gratitude, "you will have yielded to a brother's wishes."

"I no longer have any brother, since I obey."

"Will you accept my kingdom in grateful acknowledgment?"

"How passionately you love, sire, when you do love."

He did not answer. He had seized upon madame's hand and covered it with kisses. "And so you will receive this poor girl back again, and will forgive her; you will find how gentle and pure-hearted she is."

"I will maintain her in my household."

"No, you will give her your friendship, my sister."

"I have never liked her."

"Well, for my sake, you will treat her kindly, will you not, Henriette?"

"I will treat her as your mistress."

The king rose suddenly to his feet. By this word, which had so unfortunately escaped her lips, madame had destroyed the whole merit of her sacrifice. The king felt freed from all obligation. Exasperated beyond measure, and bitterly offended, he replied:

"I thank you, madame; I shall never forget the service you have rendered me." And, saluting her with an affectation of ceremony, he took his leave of her. As he passed before a glass, he saw that his eyes were red, and angrily stamped his foot on the ground. But it was too late, for Malicorne and D'Artagnan, who were standing at the door, had seen his eyes.

"The king has been crying," thought Malicorne. D'Artagnan approached the king with a respectful air, and said in a low tone of voice:

"Sire, it would be better to return to your own apartments by the small staircase."

"Why?"

"Because the dust of the road has left its traces on your face," said D'Artagnan. "By Heaven!" he thought, "when the king has been giving way like a child, let those look to it who may make her weep for whom the king has shed tears."

CHAPTER XXXI.

MADEMOISELLE DE LA VALLIERE'S POCKET-HANDKERCHIEF.

MADAME was not bad-hearted, she was only hasty and impetuous. The king was not imprudent, he was only in love. Hardly had they both entered into this sort of com-

pact, which terminated in La Valliere's recall, when they both sought to make as much as they could by their bargain. The king wished to see La Valliere every moment in the day; while madame, who was sensible of the king's annoyance ever since he had so entreated her, would not abandon La Valliere without a contest. She planted every conceivable difficulty in the king's path; he was, in fact, obliged, in order to get a glimpse of La Valliere, to be exceedingly devoted in his attentions to his sister-in-law, and this, indeed, was madame's plan of policy. As she had chosen some one to second her efforts, and as this person was our old friend Montalais, the king found himself completely hemmed in every time he paid madame a visit; he was surrounded, and was never left a moment alone. Madame displayed in her conversations a charm of manner and brilliancy of wit which eclipsed everything. Montalais followed her, and soon rendered herself perfectly insupportable to the king, which was, in fact, the very thing she expected would happen. She then set Malicorne at the king, who found the means of informing his majesty that there was a young person belonging to the court who was exceedingly miserable; and on the king inquiring who this person was, Malicorne replied that it was Mlle. de Montalais. To this the king answered that it was perfectly just that a person should be unhappy when she rendered others so. Whereupon Malicorne explained how matters stood; for he had received his directions from Montalais. The king began to open his eyes; he remarked that as soon as he made his appearance madame made hers too; that she remained in the corridors until after he had left; that she accompanied him back to his own apartments, fearing that he might speak in tne antechambers to one of her maids of honor. One evening she went further still. The king was seated, surrounded by the ladies who were present, and holding in his hand, concealed by his lace ruffle, a small note which he wished to slip into La Valliere's hand. Madame guessed both his intention and the letter too. It was very difficult to prevent the king goingwherever he pleased and yet it was necessary to prevent his going near La Valliere, to speak to her, as by so doing he could let the note fall into her lap behind her fan, and into her pocket-handkerchief. The king, who was also on the watch, suspected that a snare was being laid for him. He rose and pushed his chair, without affectation, near Mlle. de Châtillon, with whom he began to talk in a light tone. They were amusing

themselves in making rhymes; from Mlle. de Châtillon he went to Montalais, and then to Mlle. de Tonnay-Charente. And thus, by this skillful maneuver, he found himself seated opposite to La Valliere, whom he completely concealed. Madame pretended to be greatly occupied; she was altering a group of flowers that she was working in tapestry. The king showed the corner of his letter to La Valliere, and the latter held out her handkerchief with a look which signified, "Put the letter inside." Then, as the king had placed his own handkerchief upon his chair, he was adroit enough to let it fall on the ground, so that La Valliere slipped her handkerchief on the chair. The king took it up quietly, without any one observing what he did, placed the letter within it, and returned the handkerchief to the place he had taken it from. There was only just time for La Valliere to stretch out her hand to take hold of the handkerchief with its valuable contents.

But madame, who had observed everything that had passed, said to Mlle. de Châtillon, "Châtillon, be good enough to pick up the king's handkerchief, if you please; it has fallen on the carpet."

The young girl obeyed with the utmost precipitation, the king having moved from his seat, and La Valliere being in no little degree nervous and confused.

"Ah! I beg your majesty's pardon," said Mlle. de Châtillon; "you have two handkerchiefs, I perceive."

And the king was accordingly obliged to put into his pocket La Valliere's handkerchief as well as his own. He certainly gained that souvenir of Louise, who lost, however, a copy of verses which had cost the king ten hours' hard labor, and which, as far as he was concerned, was perhaps as good as a long poem. It would be impossible to describe the king's anger and La Valliere's despair; but shortly afterward a circumstance occurred which was more than remarkable. When the king left, in order to retire to his own apartments, Malicorne, informed of what had passed, one can hardly tell how, was waiting in the antechamber. The antechambers of the Palais Royal are naturally very dark, and, in the evening, they were but indifferently lighted. Nothing pleased the king more than this dim light. As a general rule, love, whose mind and heart are constantly in a blaze, dislikes light anywhere else than in the mind and heart. And so the antechamber was dark; a page carried a torch before the king, who walked on slowly, greatly annoyed at what had recently occurred.

Malicorne passed close to the king, almost stumbled against him, in fact, and begged his forgiveness with the profoundest humility; but the king, who was in an exceedingly ill temper, was very sharp in his reproof to Malicorne, who disappeared as soon and as quietly as he possibly could. Louis retired to rest, having had a misunderstanding with the queen; and the next day, as soon as he entered the cabinet, he wished to have La Valliere's handkerchief in order to press his lips to it. He called his valet.

"Fetch me," he said, "the coat I wore yesterday evening, but be very sure you do not touch anything it may contain."

The order being obeyed, the king himself searched the pocket of the coat; he found only one handkerchief, and that his own; La Valliere's had disappeared. While busied with all kinds of conjectures and suspicions, a letter was brought to him from La Valliere; it ran in these terms:

"How kind and good of you to have sent me those beautiful verses; how full of ingenuity and perseverance your affection is; how is it possible to help loving you so dearly!"

"What does this mean?" thought the king; "there must be some mistake. Look well about," said he to the valet, "for a pocket-handkerchief must be in one of my pockets; and if you do not find it, or if you have touched it—" He reflected for a moment. To make a state matter of the loss of the handkerchief would be to act absurdly, and he therefore added, "There was a letter of some importance inside the handkerchief which had somehow got among the folds of it."

"Sire," said the valet, "your majesty had only one handkerchief, and that is it."

"True, true," replied the king, setting his teeth hard together. "Oh, poverty, how I envy you! Happy is the man who can empty his own pockets of letters and handkerchiefs!"

He read La Valliere's letter over again, endeavoring to imagine in what conceivable way his verses could have reached their destination. There was a postscript to the letter:

"I send you back by your messenger this reply, so unworthy of what you sent me."

"So far so good; I shall find out something now," he

said delightedly. "Who is waiting, and who brought me this letter?"

"Monsieur Malicorne," replied the *valet-de-chambre* timidly.

"Desire him to come in."

Malicorne entered.

"You come from Mademoiselle de la Valliere?" said the king, with a sigh.

"Yes, sire."

"And you took Mademoiselle de la Valliere something from me?"

"I, sire?"

"Yes, you."

"Oh, no, sire."

"Mademoiselle de la Valliere says so distinctly."

"Oh, sire, Mademoiselle de la Valliere is mistaken."

The king frowned. "What jest is this?" he said; "explain yourself. Why does Mademoiselle de la Valliere call you my messenger? What did you take to that lady? Speak, monsieur, and quickly."

"Sire, I merely took Mademoiselle de la Valliere a pocket-handkerchief, that was all."

"A handkerchief—what handkerchief?"

"Sire, at the very moment when I had the misfortune to stumble against your majesty yesterday—a misfortune which I shall deplore to the last day of my life, especially after the dissatisfaction which you exhibited—I remained, sire, motionless with despair, your majesty being at too great a distance to hear my excuses, when I saw something white lying on the ground."

"Ah!" said the king.

"I stooped down; it was a handkerchief. For a moment I had an idea that when I stumbled against your majesty I must have been the cause of the handkerchief falling from your pocket; but as I felt it all over very respectfully, I perceived a cipher at one of the corners, and on looking at it closely, I found it was Mademoiselle de la Valliere's cipher. I presumed that on her way to madame's apartment, in the earlier part of the evening, she had let her handkerchief fall, and I accordingly hastened to restore it to her as she was leaving; and that is all I gave to Mademoiselle de la Valliere, I entreat your majesty to believe." Malicorne's manner was so simple, so full of contrition, and marked with such extreme humility, that the king was greatly amused in listening to him. He was as pleased with

him for what he had done as if he had rendered him the greatest service.

"This is the second fortunate meeting I have had with you, monsieur," he said; "you may count upon my friendly feeling."

The plain and sober truth was, that Malicorne had picked the king's-pocket of the handkerchief as dexterously as any of the pickpockets of the good city of Paris could have done. Madame never knew of this little incident, but Montalais gave La Valliere some idea of the manner in which it had really happened, and La Valliere afterward told the king, who laughed exceedingly at it, and pronounced Malicorne to be a first-rate politician. Louis XIV. was right, and it is well known that he was tolerably acquainted with human nature.

CHAPTER XXXII.

WHICH TREATS OF GARDENERS, OF LADDERS, AND MAIDS OF HONOR.

Miracles, unfortunately, could not always last forever, while madame's ill-humor still continued to last. In a week's time matters had reached such a point that the king could no longer look at La Valliere without a look of suspicion crossing his own. Whenever a promenade was proposed, madame, in order to avoid the recurrence of similar scenes to that of the thunder-storm, or the royal oak, had a variety of indispositions ready prepared; and, thanks to them, she was unable to go out, and her maids of honor were obliged to retain indoors also. There was not the slightest chance or means of paying a nocturnal visit; for in this respect the king had, on the very first occasion, experienced a severe check, which happened in the following manner. As at Fontainebleau, he had taken St. Aignan with him one evening, when he wished to pay La Valliere a visit; but he had found no one but Mlle. de Tonnay-Charente, who had begun to call out fire and thieves in such a manner that a perfect legion of chamber-maids, attendants, and pages ran to her assistance; so that St. Aignan, who had remained behind in order to save the honor of his royal master, who had fled precipitately, was obliged to submit to a severe scolding from the queen-mother, as well as from madame herself. In addition, he had, the next

morning, received two challenges from the De Montemarte family, and the king had been obliged to interfere. This mistake had been owing to the circumstance of madame having suddenly ordered a change in the apartments of her maids of honor, and directed La Valliere and Montalais to sleep in her own cabinet. Nothing, therefore, was now possible, not even any communication by letter; to write under the eyes of so ferocious an Argus as madame, whose kindness of disposition was so uncertain, was to run the risk of exposure to the greatest dangers; and it can well be conceived into what a state of continuous irritation and of ever-increasing anger all these petty annoyances threw the young lion. The king almost tormented himself to death endeavoring to discover a means of communication; and as he did not think proper to call in the aid of Malicorne or D'Artagnan, the means were not discovered at all. Malicorne had, indeed, some occasional brilliant flashes of imagination, with which he tried to inspire the king with confidence; but, whether from shame or suspicion, the king, who had at first begun to nibble at the bait, soon abandoned the hook. In this way, for instance, one evening, while the king was crossing the garden, and looking up at madame's windows, Malicorne stumbled over a ladder lying beside a border of box, and said to Manicamp, who was walking with him behind the king, and who had not either stumbled over or seen anything:

"Did you not see that I just now stumbled against a ladder, and was nearly thrown down?"

"No," said Manicamp, as usual very absent, "but it appears you did not fall."

"That doesn't matter; but it is not on that account the less dangerous to leave ladders lying about in that manner."

"True, one might hurt one's self, especially when troubled with fits of absence of mind."

"I don't mean that. What I did mean was, that it is dangerous to allow ladders to lie about so near the windows of the maids of honor."

Louis started imperceptibly.

"Why so?" inquired Manicamp.

"Speak louder," whispered Malicorne, as he touched him with his arm.

"Why so?" said Manicamp, louder.

The king listened.

"Because, for instance," said Malicorne, "a ladder nineteen feet high is just the height of the cornice of those windows."

Manicamp, instead of answering, was dreaming of something else.

"Ask me, can't you, what windows I mean?" whispered Malicorne.

"But what windows are you referring to?" said Manicamp, aloud.

"The windows of madame's apartments."

"Eh!"

"Oh! I don't say that any one would ever venture to go up a ladder into madame's room; but in madame's cabinet, merely separated by a partition, sleep two exceedingly pretty girls, Mesdemoiselles de la Valliere and De Montalais."

"By a partition," said Manicamp.

"Look; you see how brilliantly lighted madame's apartments are? Well, do you see those two windows?"

"Yes."

"And that window close to the others, but more dimly lighted?"

"Yes."

"Well, that is the room of the maids of honor. Look, look; there is Mademoiselle de la Valliere opening the window. Ah! how many soft things could an enterprising lover say to her, if he only suspected that there was lying here a ladder nineteen feet long, which would just reach the cornice."

"But she is not alone; you said Mademoiselle de Montalais is with her."

"Mademoiselle de Montalais counts for nothing; she is her oldest friend, and exceedingly devoted to her—a positive well, into which can be thrown all sorts of secrets one might wish to get rid of."

The king did not lose a single syllable of this conversation, Malicorne had even remarked that his majesty had slackened his pace, in order to give him time to finish. So, when he arrived at the door, he dismissed every one, with the exception of Malicorne—a circumstance which excited no surprise, for it was known that the king was in love; and they suspected he was going to compose some verses by moonlight; and, although there was no moon that evening, the king might, nevertheless, have some verses to compose. Every one, therefore, took his leave; and immediately afterward the king turned toward Malicorne, who respectfully waited until his majesty should address him.

"What were you saying just now about a ladder, Monsieur Malicorne?" he asked

"Did I say anything about ladders, sire?" said Malicorne, looking up as if in search of his words, which had flown away.

"Yes, of a ladder nineteen feet long."

"Oh, yes, sire; I remember, but I spoke to Monsieur Manicamp, and I should not have said a word had I known your majesty could have heard us."

"And why would you not have said a word?"

"Because I should not have liked to have got the gardener scolded who had left it there—poor fellow!"

"Don't make yourself uneasy on that account. What is this ladder like?"

"If your majesty wishes to see it, nothing is easier, for there it is."

"In that box hedge?"

"Exactly."

"Show it to me."

Malicorne turned back, and led the king up to the ladder, saying:

"This is it, sire."

"Pull it this way a little."

When Malicorne had brought the ladder on to the gravel walk, the king began to step its whole length.

"Hum!" he said, "you say it is nineteen feet long?"

"Yes, sire."

"Nineteen feet—that is rather long. I hardly believe it can be so long as that."

"You cannot judge very correctly with the ladder in that position, sire. If it were upright, against a tree or a wall, for instance, you would be better able to judge, because the comparison would assist you a good deal."

"Oh! it does not matter, Monsieur Malicorne; but I can hardly believe that the ladder is nineteen feet high."

"I know how accurate your majesty's glance is, and yet I would wager."

The king shook his head.

"There is one unanswerable means of verifying it," said Malicorne.

"What is that?"

"Every one knows, sire, that the ground-floor of the palace is eighteen feet high."

"True, that is very well known."

"Well, sire, if I place the ladder against the wall, we shall be able to ascertain."

"True."

Malicorne took up the ladder, like a feather, and placed it upright against the wall. And, in order to try the experiment, he chose, or chance, perhaps, directed him to choose, the very window of the cabinet where La Valliere was. The ladder just reached the edge of the cornice, that is to say, the sill of the window; so that, by standing upon the last round but one of the latter, a man of about the middle height, as the king was, for instance, could easily hold a communication with those who might be in the room. Hardly had the ladder been properly placed than the king, dropping the assumed part he had been playing in the comedy, began to ascend the rounds of the ladder, which Malicorne held at the bottom. But hardly had he completed half the distance when a patrol of Swiss Guards appeared in the garden, and advanced straight toward them. The king descended with the utmost precipitation, and concealed himself among the trees. Malicorne at once perceived that he must offer himself as a sacrifice; for, if he, too, were to conceal himself, the guard would search everywhere until they had found either himself or the king, perhaps both. It would be far better, therefore, that he alone should be discovered. And, consequently, Malicorne hid himself so clumsily that he was the only one arrested. As soon as he was arrested Malicorne was taken to the guard-house; and there he declared who he was, and was immediately recognized. In the meantime, by concealing himself first behind one clump of trees and then behind another, the king reached the side door of his apartments, very much humiliated, and still more disappointed. More than that, the noise made in arresting Malicorne had drawn La Valliere and Montalais to their window; and even madame herself had appeared at her own, with a pair of wax-candles, asking what was the matter.

In the meantime, Malicorne sent for D'Artagnan, who did not lose a moment in hurrying to him. But it was in vain he attempted to make him understand his reasons, and in vain also that D'Artagnan did understand them; and, further, it was equally in vain that both their sharp and inventive minds endeavored to give another turn to the adventure; there was no other resource left for Malicorne but to let it be supposed that he had wished to enter Mlle. de Montalais' apartment, as St. Aignan had passed for having wished to force Mlle. de Tonnay-Charente's door. Madame was inflexible; in the first place, because if Malicorne had, in fact, wished to enter her apartment at night, through

the window, and by means of the ladder, in order to see Montalais, it was a punishable offense on Malicorne's part, and he must be punished accordingly; and, in the second place, if Malicorne, instead of acting in his own name, had acted as an intermediary between La Valliere and a person whose name need not be mentioned, his crime was in that case even greater, since love, which is an excuse for everything, did not exist in the present case as an excuse for him. Madame, therefore, made the greatest possible disturbance about the matter, and obtained his dismissal from Monsieur's household, without reflecting, poor blind creature, that both Malicorne and Montalais held her fast in their clutches in consequence of her visit to De Guiche, and in a variety of other ways equally delicate. Montalais, who was perfectly furious, wished to revenge herself immediately, but Malicorne pointed out to her that the king's countenance would repay them for all the disgraces in the world, and that it was a great thing to have to suffer on his majesty's account.

Malicorne was perfectly right, and, therefore, although Montalais had the spirit of ten women in her, he succeeded in bringing her round to his own opinion. And we must not omit to state that the king helped them to console themselves, for in the first place, he presented Malicorne with fifty thousand francs as a compensation for the post he had lost, and in the next place, he gave him an appointment in his own household, delighted to have an opportunity of revenging himself in such a manner upon madame for all she had made him and La Valliere suffer. But as he no longer had Malicorne to steal his pocket-handkerchiefs and to measure ladders for him, the poor lover was in a terrible state. There seemed to be no hope, therefore, of ever getting near La Valliere again so long as she should remain at the Palais Royal. All the dignities and all the money in the world could not remedy that. Fortunately, however, Malicorne was on the lookout, and this he did so successfully that he met Montalais, who, to do her justice, it must be admitted, did her best to meet Malicorne.

"What do you do during the night in madame's apartment?" he asked the young girl.

"Why, I go to sleep, of course," she replied.

"But it is very wrong to sleep; it can hardly be possible that with the pain you are suffering, you can manage to do so."

"And what am I suffering from, may I ask?"

"Are you not in despair at my absence?"

"Of course not, since you have received fifty thousand francs and an appointment in the king's household."

"That is a matter of no moment; you are exceedingly afflicted at not seeing me as you used to see me formerly, and more than all, you are in despair at my having lost madame's confidence. Come, now, is not that true?"

"Perfectly true."

"Very good; your distress of mind prevents you sleeping at night, and so you sob, and sigh, and blow your nose ten times every minute as loud as possible."

"But, my dear Malicorne, madame cannot endure the slightest noise near her."

"I know that perfectly well; of course, she can't endure anything; and so, I tell you, she will not lose a minute, when she sees your deep distress, in turning you out of her room without a moment's delay."

"I understand."

"Very fortunate you do."

"Well, and what will happen next?"

"The next thing that will happen will be, that La Valliere, finding herself alone without you, will groan and utter such loud lamentations that she will exhibit despair enough for two persons."

"In that case she will be put into another room."

"Precisely so."

"Yes, but which?"

"Which?"

"Yes, that will puzzle you to say, Mr. Inventor-General."

"Not at all; wherever and whatever the room may be, it will always be preferable to madame's own room."

"That is true."

"Very good; so begin your lamentations a little to-night."

"I certainly will not fail to do so."

"And give La Valliere a hint also."

"Oh! don't fear her; she cries quite enough already to herself."

"Very well; all she has to do is to cry out loud."

And they separated.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WHICH TREATS OF CARPENTRY OPERATIONS, AND FURNISHES DETAILS UPON THE MODE OF CONSTRUCTING STAIRCASES.

THE advice which had been given to Montalais was communicated by her to La Valliere, who could not but acknowledge that it was by no means deficient in judgment, and who, after a certain amount of resistance, arising rather from her timidity than from her indifference to the project, resolved to put it into execution. This story of the two girls weeping, and filling madame's bedroom with the noisiest lamentations, was Malicorne's *chef-d'œuvre.* As nothing is so probable as improbability, so natural as romance, this kind of Arabian Nights story succeeded perfectly with madame. The first thing she did was to send Montalais away, and then, three days, or rather three nights, afterward, she had La Valliere removed. She gave to the latter one of the small rooms on the top story, situated immediately over the apartments allotted to the gentlemen of Monsieur's suite. One story only, that is to say, a mere flooring, separated the maids of honor from the officers and gentlemen of her husband's household. A private staircase, which was placed under Mme. de Navailles' surveillance, was the only means of communication. For greater safety, Mme. de Navailles, who had heard of his majesty's previous attempts, had the windows of the rooms and the openings of the chimneys carefully barred. There was, therefore, every possible security provided for Mlle. de la Valliere, whose room bore more resemblance to a cage than to anything else. When Mlle. de la Valliere was in her own room, and she was there very frequently, for madame scarcely ever had any occasion for her services, since she once knew she was safe under Mme. de Navailles' inspection, Mlle. de la Valliere had no other means of amusing herself than that of looking through the bars of her windows. It happened, therefore, that one morning, as she was looking out, as usual, she perceived Malicorne at one of the windows exactly opposite to her own. He held a carpenter's rule in his hand, was surveying the buildings, and seemed to be adding up some figures on paper. La Valliere recognized Malicorne and bowed to him; Malicorne, in his turn, replied by a profound bow, and disappeared from the window. She was surprised at this marked

coolness, so unusual with his unfailing good-humor, but she remembered that he had lost his appointment on her account, and that he could hardly be very amiably disposed toward her, since, in all probability, she would never be in a position to make him any recompense for what he had lost. She knew how to forgive offenses, and with still greater reason could she sympathize with misfortune. La Valliere would have asked Montalais her opinion, if she had been there; but she was absent, it being the hour she usually devoted to her own correspondence. Suddenly La Valliere observed something thrown from the window where Malicorne had been standing, pass across the open space which separated the two windows from each other, enter her room through the iron bars, and roll upon the floor. She advanced with no little curiosity toward this object, and picked it up; it was a winder for silk, only, in this instance, instead of silk, a small piece of paper was rolled round it. La Valliere unrolled it, and read the following:

"MADEMOISELLE: I am exceedingly anxious to learn two things: the first is, to know if the flooring of your apartment is wood or brick; the second, to know at what distance your bed is placed from the window. Forgive my importunity, and will you be good enough to send me an answer by the same way you receive this letter—that is to say, by means of the silk-winder; only, instead of throwing it into my room, as I have thrown it into yours, which will be too difficult for you to attempt, have the goodness merely to let it fall. Believe me, mademoiselle, your most humble and most respectful servant. MALICORNE.

"Write the reply, if you please, upon the letter itself."

"Ah! poor fellow," exclaimed La Valliere, "he must have gone out of his mind;" and she directed toward her correspondent—of whom she caught but a faint glimpse, in consequence of the darkness of his room—a look full of compassionate consideration. Malicorne understood her, and shook his head, as if he meant to say, "No, no; I am not out of my mind; be quite satisfied."

She smiled, as if still in doubt.

"No, no," he signified by a gesture, "my head is perfectly right;" and pointed to his head; then, after moving his hand like a man who writes very rapidly, he put his hands together, as if entreating her to write.

La Valliere, even if he were mad, saw no impropriety in

doing what Malicorne requested her; she took a pencil and wrote, "wood," and then counted ten paces from her window to her bed, and wrote, "ten feet;" and having done this, she looked out again at Malicorne, who bowed to her, signifying that he was about to descend. La Valliere understood that it was to pick up the silk-winder. She approached the window, and in accordance with Malicorne's instructions, let it fall. The winder was still rolling along the flagstones as Malicorne started after it, overtook and picked it up, began to peel it as a monkey would do with a nut, and ran straight toward M. de St. Aignan's apartments. St. Aignan had selected, or rather solicited, that his rooms might be as near the king as possible, as certain plants seek the sun's rays in order to develop themselves more luxuriantly. His apartment consisted of two rooms in that portion of the palace occupied by Louis XIV. himself. M. de St. Aignan was very proud of his proximity, which afforded easy access to his majesty, and, more than that, the favor of occasional unexpected meetings. At the moment we are now referring to, he was engaged in having both his rooms magnificently carpeted, with the expectation of receiving the honor of frequent visits from the king; for his majesty, since his passion for La Valliere, had chosen St. Aignan as his confidant, and could not, in fact, do without him either night or day. Malicorne introduced himself to the comte, and met with no difficulties, because he had been favorably noticed by the king; and also because the credit which one man may happen to enjoy is always a bait for others. St. Aignan asked his visitor if he brought any news with him.

"Yes; great news," replied the latter.

"Ah! ah!" said St. Aignan, "what is it?"

"Mademoiselle de la Valliere has changed her quarters."

"What do you mean?" said St. Aignan, opening his eyes very wide. "She was living in the same apartments as madame."

"Precisely so; but madame got tired of her proximity, and has installed her in a room which is situated exactly above your future apartment."

"What, up there!" exclaimed St. Aignan, with surprise, and pointing at the floor above him with his finger.

"No," said Malicorne; "yonder," indicating the building opposite."

"What do you mean, then, by saying that her room is above my apartment?"

"Because I am sure that your apartment ought most naturally to be under Mademoiselle de la Valliere's room."

St. Aignan, at this remark, gave poor Malicorne a look, similar to one of those La Valliere had already given a quarter of an hour before, that is to say, he thought he had lost his senses.

"Monsieur," said Malicorne to him, "I wish to answer what you are thinking about."

"What do you mean by 'what I am thinking about?' "

"My reason is, that you have not clearly understood what I want to convey."

"I admit it."

"Well, then, you are aware that underneath the apartments set apart for madame's maids of honor the gentlemen in attendance on the king and on Monsieur are lodged."

"Yes, I know that, since Manicamp, De Wardes, and others are living there."

"Precisely. Well, monsieur, admire the singularity of the circumstance; the two rooms destined for Monsieur de Guiche are exactly the very two rooms situated underneath those which Mademoiselle de Montalais and Mademoiselle de la Valliere occupy."

"Well, what then?"

" 'What then,' do you say? Why, these two rooms are empty, since Monsieur de Guiche is now lying wounded at Fontainebleau."

"I assure you, my dear monsieur, I cannot guess your meaning."

"Well, if I had the happiness to call myself St. Aignan I should guess immediately."

"And what would you do then?"

"I should at once change the rooms I am occupying here for those which Monsieur de Guiche is not using yonder."

"Can you suppose such a thing?" said St. Aignan disdainfully. "What, abandon the chief post of honor, the proximity to the king, a privilege conceded only to princes of the blood, to dukes, and peers? Permit me to tell you, my dear Monsieur de Malicorne, that you must be out of your senses."

"Monsieur," replied the young man seriously, "you commit two mistakes. My name is Malicorne, simply; and I am in perfect possession of all my senses." Then, drawing a paper from his pocket, he said: "Listen to what I am going to say; and afterward I will show you this paper."

"I am listening," said St. Aignan.

"You know that madame looks after La Valliere as carefully as Argus did after the nymph Io."

"I do."

"You know that the king has sought for an opportunity, but uselessly, of speaking to the prisoner, and that neither you nor myself have yet succeeded in procuring him this piece of good fortune."

"You certainly ought to know something on that subject, my poor Malicorne."

"Very good; what do you suppose would happen to the man whose imagination devised some means of bringing the two lovers together?"

"Oh! the king would have no bounds to his gratitude."

"Let me ask you, then, Monsieur de St. Aignan, whether you would not be curious to taste a little of this royal gratitude?"

"Certainly," replied St. Aignan, "any favor of my master, as a recognition of the proper discharge of my duty, would assuredly be most precious to me."

"In that case, look at this paper, Monsieur le Comte."

"What is it—a plan?"

"Yes; a plan of Monsieur de Guiche's two rooms, which, in all probability, will soon be your two rooms."

"Oh, no; whatever may happen."

"Why so?"

"Because my own rooms are the envy of too many gentlemen, to whom I shall not certainly give them up; Monsieur de Roquelaure, for instance, Monsieur de la Ferté, and Monsieur de Dangeau, would all be anxious to get them."

"In that case I shall leave you, Monsieur le Comte, and I shall go and offer to one of those gentlemen the plan I have just shown you, together with the advantages annexed to it."

"But why do you not keep them for yourself?" inquired St. Aignan suspiciously.

"Because the king would never do me the honor of paying me a visit openly, while he would readily go and see any one of those gentlemen."

"What! the king would go and see any one of those gentlemen?"

"Go—most certainly would he, ten times instead of once. Is it possible you can ask me if the king would go to an apartment which would bring him nearer to Mademoiselle de la Valliere?"

"Yes, indeed, admirably near her, with a whole floor between them."

Malicorne unfolded the piece of paper which had been wrapped round the bobbin.

"Monsieur le Comte," he said, "have the goodness to observe that the flooring of Mademoiselle de la Valliere's room is merely a wooden flooring."

"Well?"

"Well, all you would have to do would be to get hold of a journeyman carpenter, lock him up in your apartments, without letting him know where you have taken him to, and let him make a hole in your ceiling, and, consequently, in the flooring of Mademoiselle de la Valliere's room."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed St. Aignan, as if dazzled.

"What is the matter?" said Malicorne.

"Nothing, except that you have hit upon a singularly bold idea, monsieur."

"It will seem a very trifling one to the king, I assure you."

"Lovers never think of the risk they run."

"What danger do you apprehend, Monsieur le Comte?"

"Why, effecting such an opening as that will make a terrible noise, it will be heard over the whole palace."

"Oh, Monsieur le Comte, I am quite sure that the carpenter I shall select will not make the slightest noise in the world. He will saw an opening six feet square, with a saw covered with tow, and no one, not even those adjoining, will know that he is at work."

"My dear Monsieur Malicorne, you astound, you positively bewilder me."

"To continue," replied Malicorne quietly, "in the room, the ceiling of which you have cut through, you will put up a staircase, which will either allow Mademoiselle de la Valliere to descend into your room, or the king to ascend into Mademoiselle de la Valliere's room."

"But the staircase will be seen."

"No; for in your room it will be hidden by a partition, over which you will throw a tapestry similar to that which covers the rest of the apartment; and in Mademoiselle de la Valliere's room it will not be seen, for the trapdoor, which will be a part of the flooring itself, will be made to open under the bed."

"Of course," said St. Aignan, whose eyes began to sparkle with delight.

"And now, Monsieur le Comte, there is no occasion to make you admit that the king will frequently come to the room where such a staircase is constructed. I think that

Monsieur Dangeau, particularly, will be struck by my idea, and I shall now go and explain to him."

"But, my dear Monsieur Malicorne, you forget that you spoke to me about it the first, and that I have, consequently, the right of priority."

"Do you wish for the preference?"

"Do I wish it? Of course I do."

"The fact is, Monsieur de St. Aignan, I am presenting you with that which is as good as the promise of an additional step in the peerage, and perhaps even a good estate to accompany your dukedom."

"At least," replied St. Aignan, "it will give me an opportunity of showing the king that he is not mistaken in occasionally calling me his friend; an opportunity, dear Monsieur Malicorne, for which I am indebted to you."

"And which you will not forget to remember?" inquired Malicorne, smiling.

"Nothing will delight me more, monsieur."

"But I am not the king's friend, I am simply his attendant."

"Yes; and if you imagine that that staircase is as good as a dukedom for myself, I think there will certainly be letters of nobility for you."

Malicorne bowed.

"All I have to do now," said St. Aignan, "is to move as soon as possible."

"I do not think the king will object to it; ask his permission, however."

"I will go and see him this very moment."

"And I will run and get the carpenter I was speaking of."

"When will he be here?"

"This very evening."

"Do not forget your precautions."

"He shall be brought with his eyes bandaged."

"And I will send you one of my carriages."

"Without arms."

"With one of my servants without livery. But stay, what will La Valliere say if she sees what is going on?"

"Oh! I can assure you she will be very much interested in the operation, and equally sure that if the king has not courage enough to ascend to her room, she will have sufficient curiosity to come down to him."

"We will live in hope," said St. Aignan; "and now I am off to his majesty. At what time will the carpenter be here?"

"At eight o'clock."

"How long do you suppose he will take to make this opening?"

"About a couple of hours; only afterward he must have sufficient time to effect what may be called the junction between the two rooms. One night and a portion of the following day will do; we must not reckon upon less than two days, including putting up the staircase."

"Two days? That is very long."

"Nay, when one undertakes to open a door into paradise itself, we must, at least, take care it is properly done."

"Quite right; so farewell for a short time, dear Monsieur Malicorne. I shall begin to remove the day after to-morrow, in the evening."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE PROMENADE BY TORCHLIGHT.

St. Aignan, delighted with what he had just heard, and rejoiced at what the future foreshadowed for him, bent his steps toward De Guiche's two rooms. He who, a quarter of an hour previously, would not have yielded up his own rooms for a million of francs, was now ready to expend a million, if it were necessary, upon the acquisition of the two happy rooms he coveted so eagerly. But he did not meet with so many obstacles. M. de Guiche did not yet know whereabouts he was to lodge, and, besides, was still far too suffering to trouble himself about his lodgings; and so St. Aignan obtained De Guiche's two rooms without difficulty. As for M. Dangeau, he was so immeasurably delighted that he did not even give himself the trouble to think whether St. Aignan had any particular reason for removing. Within an hour after St. Aignan's new resolution he was in possession of the two rooms; and ten minutes later Malicorne entered, followed by the upholsterers. During this time the king asked for St. Aignan; the valet ran to his late apartments and found M. Dangeau there; Dangeau sent him on to De Guiche's, and St. Aignan was found there; but a little delay had, of course, taken place, and the king had already exhibited once or twice evident signs of impatience, when St. Aignan entered his royal master's presence, quite out of breath.

"You, too, abandon me, then," said Louis XIV., in a

similar tone of lamentation to that with which Cæsar, eighteen hundred years previously, had used the *tu quoque*.

"Sire, I am very far from abandoning you, for, on the contrary, I am busily occupied in changing my lodgings."

"What do you mean? I thought you had finished moving three days ago?"

"Yes, sire. But I don't find myself comfortable where I am and so I am going to change to the opposite side of the building."

"Was I not right when I said you were abandoning me?" exclaimed the king. "Oh! this exceeds all endurance. But so it is; there was only one woman for whom my heart cared at all, and all my family is leagued together to tear her from me; and my friend, to whom I confided my distress, and who helped me to bear up under it, has become wearied of my complaints and is going to leave me without even asking my permission."

St. Aignan began to laugh. The king at once guessed there must be some mystery in this want of respect.

"What is it?" cried the king, full of hope.

"This, sire: that the friend whom the king calumniates is going to try if he cannot restore to his sovereign the happiness he has lost."

"Are you going to let me see La Valliere?" said Louis XIV.

"I cannot say so positively, but I hope so."

"How—how?—tell me that, St. Aignan. I wish to know what your project is, and to help you with all my power."

"Sire," replied St. Aignan, "I cannot, even myself, tell very well how I must set about attaining success; but I have every reason to believe that from to-morrow——"

"To-morrow, do you say? What happiness! But why are you changing your rooms?"

"In order to serve your majesty to greater advantage."

"How can your moving serve me?"

"Do you happen to know where the two rooms destined for De Guiche are situated?"

"Yes."

"Well, your majesty now knows where I am going."

"Very likely; but that does not help me."

"What! is it possible you do not understand, sire, that above De Guiche's lodgings are two rooms, one of which is Mademoiselle de Montalais', and the other——"

"La Valliere's, is it not so, St. Aignan? Oh, yes, yes! It is a brilliant idea, St. Aignan, a true friend's idea, a poet's

idea; in bringing me nearer her from whom the world seems to unite to separate me, you are doing far more than Pylades did for Orestes, or Patroclus for Achilles."

"Sire," said St. Aignan, with a smile, "I question whether, if your majesty were to know my projects in their full extent, you would continue to confer such pompous qualifications upon me. Ah! sire, I know how very different are the epithets which certain Puritans of the court will not fail to apply to me when they learn what I intend to do for your majesty."

"St. Aignan, I am dying from impatience; I am in a perfect fever; I shall never be able to wait until to-morrow—to-morrow! Why, to-morrow is an eternity."

"And yet, sire, I shall require you, if you please, to go out presently and divert your impatience by a good walk."

"With you—agreed; we will talk about your projects, we will talk of her."

"Nay, sire; I remain here."

"Whom shall I go out with, then?"

"With the queen and all the ladies of the court."

"Nothing shall induce me to do that, St. Aignan."

"And yet, sire, you must do it."

"No, no—a thousand times, no! I will never again expose myself to the horrible torture of being close to her, of seeing her, of touching her dress as I pass by her, and yet not to be able to say a word to her. No, I renounce a torture which you suppose to be happiness, but which consumes and eats away my very life; to see her in the presence of strangers, and not to tell her that I love her, when my whole being reveals my affection and betrays me to every one; no, I have sworn never to do it again, and I will keep my oath."

"Yet, sire, pray listen to me for a moment."

"I will listen to nothing, St. Aignan."

"In that case, I will continue; it is most urgent, sire—pray understand me, it is of the greatest importance—that madame and her maids of honor should be absent for two hours from the palace."

"I cannot understand your meaning at all, St. Aignan."

"It is hard for me to give my sovereign directions what to do; but in this circumstance I do give you directions, sire; and either a hunting or a promenade party must be got up."

"But if I were to do what you wish it would be a caprice, a mere whim. In displaying such an impatient humor, I

show my whole court that I have no control over my own feelings. Do not people already say that I am dreaming of the conquest of the world, but that I ought previously to begin by achieving a conquest over myself?"

"Those who say so, sire, are insolent and factious persons; but whoever they may be, if your majesty prefers to listen to them, I have nothing further to say. In such a case, that which we have fixed to take place to-morrow must be postponed indefinitely."

"Nay, St. Aignan, I will go out this evening—I will go by torchlight to sleep at St. Germain; I will breakfast there to-morrow, and will return to Paris by three o'clock. Will that do?"

"Admirably."

"In that case, I will set out this evening at eight o'clock."

"Your majesty has fixed upon the exact minute."

"And you positively will tell me nothing more?"

"It is because I have nothing more to tell you. Industry goes for something in this world, sire; but yet chance plays so important a part in it that I have been accustomed to leave her the narrowest part, confident that she will manage so as to always take the widest."

"Well, I abandon myself entirely to you."

"And you are quite right."

Comforted in this manner, the king went immediately to madame, to whom he announced the intended expedition. Madame fancied at the first moment that she saw in this unexpectedly arranged party a plot of the king's to converse with La Valliere, either on the road under cover of the darkness, or in some other way, but she took especial care not to show any of her fancies to her brother-in-law, and accepted the invitation with a smile upon her lips. She gave directions aloud that her maids of honor should accompany her, secretly intending in the evening to take the most effectual steps to interfere with his majesty's attachment. Then, when she was alone, and at the very moment the poor lover, who had issued his orders for the departure, was reveling in the idea that Mlle. de la Valliere would form one of the party—at the very moment, perhaps, when he was luxuriating in the sad happiness which persecuted lovers enjoy of realizing by the sense of sight alone all the delights of an interdicted possession—at the very moment, we say, madame, who was surrounded by her maids of honor, said:

"Two ladies will be enough for me this evening, Made-

moiselle de Tonnay-Charente and Mademoiselle de Montalais."

La Valliere had anticipated the omission of herself, and was prepared for it; but persecution had rendered her courageous, and she did not give madame the pleasure of seeing on her face the impression of the shock her heart had received. On the contrary, smiling with that ineffable gentleness which gave an angelic expression to her features:

"In that case, madame, I shall be at liberty this evening, I suppose?" she said.

"Of course."

"I shall be able to employ it, then, in progressing with that piece of tapestry which your highness has been good enough to notice, and which I have already had the honor of offering to you."

And having made a respectful obeisance, she withdrew to her own apartment. Mlles. de Tonnay-Charente and De Montalais did the same. The rumor of the intended promenade was soon spread all over the palace; ten minutes afterward Malicorne learned madame's resolution, and slipped under Montalais' door a note, in the following terms:

"La Valliere must positively pass the night with madame."

Montalais, in pursuance of the compact she had entered into, began by burning the paper, and then sat down to reflect. Montalais was a girl full of expedients, and so had very soon arranged her plan. Toward five o'clock, which was the hour for her to repair to madame's apartment, she was running across the courtyard, and had reached within a dozen paces a group of officers, when she uttered a cry, fell gracefully on one knee, rose again, and walked on limpingly. The gentlemen ran forward to her assistance; Montalais had sprained her foot. Faithful to the discharge of her duty, she insisted, however, notwithstanding her accident, upon going to madame's apartment.

"What is the matter, and why do you limp so?" she inquired. "I mistook you for La Valliere."

Montalais related how it had happened, that in hurrying on, in order to arrive as quickly as possible, she had sprained her foot. Madame seemed to pity her, and wished to have a surgeon sent for immediately, but she, assuring her that there was nothing really serious in the accident, said:

"My only regret, madame, is that it will preclude my

attendance on you, and I should have begged Mademoiselle de la Valliere to take my place with your royal highness, but—" seeing that madame frowned, she added, "I have not done so."

"Why did you not do so?" inquired madame.

"Because poor La Valliere seemed so happy to have her liberty for a whole evening and night, too, that I did not feel courageous enough to ask her to take my place."

"What, is she so delighted as that?" inquired madame, struck by these words.

"She is wild with delight; she, who is always so melancholy, was singing like a bird. Besides, your highness knows how much she detests going out, and also that her character has a spice of wildness in it."

"Oh, oh!" thought madame, "this extreme delight hardly seems natural to me."

"She has already made all her preparations for dining in her own room *tête-à-êtte* with one of her favorite books. And then, as your highness has six other young ladies who would be delighted to accompany you, I did not make my proposal to La Valliere."

Madame did not say a word in reply.

"Have I acted properly?" continued Montalais, with a slight fluttering of the heart, seeing the little success that attended the *ruse de guerre* which she had relied upon with so much confidence that she had not thought it even necessary to try and find another. "Does madame approve of what I have done?" she continued.

Madame was reflecting that the king could very easily leave St. Germain during the night, and that, as it was only four leagues and a half from Paris to St. Germain, he might very easily be in Paris in an hour's time.

"Tell me," she said, "whether La Valliere, when she heard of your accident, offered at least to bear you company?"

"Oh! she does not yet know of my accident; but even did she know of it, I should not most certainly ask her to do anything which might interfere with her own plans. I think she wishes this evening to realize quietly by herself that amusement of the late king, when he said to Monsieur de Cinq-Mars, 'Let us amuse ourselves by doing nothing and making ourselves miserable.'"

Madame felt convinced that some mysterious love adventure was hidden beneath this strong desire for solitude. This mystery might possibly be Louis' return during the

night; it could not be doubted any longer La Valliere had been informed of his intended return, and that was the reason for her delight at having to remain behind at the Palais Royal. It was a plan settled and arranged beforehand.

"I will not be their dupe, though," said madame, and she took a decisive step. "Mademoiselle de Montalais," she said, "will you have the goodness to inform your friend, Mademoiselle de la Valliere, that I am exceedingly sorry to disarrange her projects of solitude, but that instead of becoming *ennuyée* by remaining behind alone, as she wished, she will be good enough to accompany us to St. Germain and get *ennuyée* there?"

"Ah, poor La Valliere," said Montalais compassionately, but with her heart throbbing with delight. "Oh, madame, could there not be some means——"

"Enough," said madame; "I desire it. I prefer Mademoiselle la Baume le Blanc's society to that of any one else. Go, and send her to me, and take care of your foot."

Montalais did not wait for the order to be repeated; she returned to her room, wrote an answer to Malicorne, and slipped it under the carpet. The answer simply said:

"She is going."

A Spartan could not have written more laconically.

"By this means," thought madame, "I will look narrowly after all on the road; she shall sleep near me during the night, and his majesty must be very clever if he can exchange a single word with Mademoiselle de la Valliere."

La Valliere received the order to set off with the same indifferent gentleness with which she had received the order to remain. But inwardly her delight was extreme, and she looked upon this change in the princess' resolution as a consolation which Providence had sent her. With less penetration than madame possessed, she attributed all to chance. While every one, with the exception of those in disgrace, of those who were ill, and those who were suffering from sprains, were proceeding toward St. Germain, Malicorne smuggled his workman into the palace in one of M. de St. Aignan's carriages, and led him into the room corresponding to La Valliere's room. The man set to work tempted by the splendid reward which had been promised him. As the very best tools and implements had been selected from the reserve stock belonging to the engineers

attached to the king's household—and among other, a saw with teeth so sharp and well tempered that it could, under water even, cut through oaken joists as hard as iron—the work in question advanced very rapidly, and a square portion of the ceiling, taken from between two of the joists, fell into the arms of St. Aignan, Malicorne, the workman, and a confidential valet, the latter being one brought into the world to see and hear everything, but to repeat nothing. In accordance with a new plan indicated by Malicorne, the opening was effected in an angle of the room, and for this reason: As there was no dressing-closet adjoining La Valliere's room, she had solicited, and had that very morning obtained, a large screen intended to serve as a partition. The screen which had been conceded was perfectly sufficient to conceal the opening, which would, besides, be hidden by all the artifices which cabinet-makers have at their command. The opening having been made, the workman glided between the joists, and found himself in La Valliere's room. When there, he cut a square opening in the flooring, and out of the boards he manufactured a trap so accurately fitting into the opening that the most practiced eye could hardly detect the necessary interstices made by joining the flooring. Malicorne had provided for everything; a ring and a couple of hinges, which had been bought for the purpose, were affixed so the trapdoor; and a small circular staircase had been bought ready made by the industrious Malicorne, who had paid two thousand francs for it. It was higher than was required, but the carpenter reduced the number of steps, and it was found to suit exactly. This staircase, destined to receive so illustrious a weight, was merely fastened to the wall by a couple of iron clamps, and its base was fixed into the floor of the comte's room by two iron pegs screwed down tightly, so that the king, and all his cabinet councilors, too, might pass up and down the staircase without any fear. Every blow of the hammer fell upon a thick pad or cushion, and the saw was not used until the handle had been wrapped in wools, and the blade steeped in oil. The noisiest part of the work, moreover, had taken place during the night and early in the morning, that is to say, when La Valliere and madame were both absent. When, about two o'clock in the afternoon, the court returned to the Palais Royal, La Valliere went up into her own room. Everything was in its place, and not the smallest particle of sawdust, nor the smallest chip, was left to bear witness to the violation of her domicile. St.

Aignan, however, who had wished to do his utmost in getting the work done, had torn his fingers, and his shirt, too, and had expended no ordinary quantity of perspiration in the king's service. The palms of his hands, especially, were covered with blisters, occasioned by his having held the ladder for Malicorne. He had, moreover, brought, one by one, the five pieces of the staircase, each consisting of two steps. In fact, we can safely assert that if the king had seen him so ardently at work, his majesty would have sworn an eternal gratitude toward his faithful attendant. As Malicorne had anticipated, the workman had completely finished the job in twenty-four hours; he received twenty-four louis, and left overwhelmed with delight, for he had gained in one day as much as six months' hard work would have procured him. No one had the slightest suspicion of what had taken place in the room under Mlle. de la Valliere's apartment. But in the evening of the second day, at the very moment La Valliere had just left madame's circle and had returned to her own room, she heard a slight creaking sound at the end of it. Astonished, she looked to see whence it proceeded, and the noise began again.

"Who is there?" she said, in a tone of alarm.

"I," replied the well-known voice of the king.

"You! you!" cried the young girl, who for a moment fancied herself under the influence of a dream. "But where? You, sire?"

"Here," replied the king, opening one of the folds of the screen and appearing like a ghost at the end of the room.

La Valliere uttered a loud cry, and fell trembling into an armchair as the king advanced respectfully toward her.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE APPARITION.

La Valliere very soon recovered from her surprise, for, owing to his respectful bearing, the king inspired her with more confidence by his presence than his sudden appearance had deprived her of. But as he noticed that that which made La Valliere most uneasy was the means by which he had effected an entrance into her room, he explained to her the system of the staircase concealed by the screen, and strongly disavowed the notion of his being a supernatural appearance.

"Oh, sire!" said La Valliere, shaking her fair head with a most engaging smile, "present or absent, you do not appear to my mind more at one time than at another."

"Which means, Louise——"

"Oh, what you know so well, sire; that there is not one moment in which the poor girl whose secret you surprised at Fontainebleau, and whom you came to snatch from the foot of the cross itself, does not think of you."

"Louise, you overwhelm me with joy and happiness."

La Valliere smiled mournfully, and continued: "But, sire, have you reflected that your ingenious invention could not be of the slightest service to us?"

"Why so? Tell me, I am waiting most anxiously."

"Because this room may be subject to being searched at any moment of the day. Madame herself may, at any time, come here accidentally; my companions run in at any moment they please. To fasten the door on the inside, is to denounce myself as plainly as if I had written above, 'No admittance, the king is here.' Even now, sire, at this very moment, there is nothing to prevent the door opening, and your majesty being seen here."

"In that case," said the king laughingly, "I should indeed be taken for a phantom, for no one can tell in what way I came here. Besides, it is only phantoms who can pass through brick walls, or floors and ceilings."

"Oh, sire, reflect for a moment how terrible the scandal would be! Nothing equal to it could ever have been previously said about the maids of honor, poor creatures! whom evil report, however, hardly ever spares."

"And your conclusion from all this, my dear Louise; come, explain yourself."

"Alas! it is a hard thing to say—but your majesty must suppress staircase plots, surprises, and all; for the evil consequences which would result from your being found here would be far greater than the happiness of seeing each other."

"Well, Louise," replied the king tenderly, "instead of removing this staircase by which I have ascended, there is a far more simple means, of which you have not thought."

"A means—another means!"

"Yes, another. Oh, you do not love me as I love you, Louise, since my invention is quicker than yours."

She looked at the king, who held out his hand to her, which she took and gently pressed between her own.

"You were saying," continued the king, "that I shall be

detected coming here, where any one who pleases can enter."

"Stay, sire; at this very moment, even while you are speaking about it, I tremble with dread of your being discovered."

"But you would not be found out, Louise, if you were to descend the staircase which leads to the room underneath."

"Oh, sire! what do you say?" cried Louise, in alarm.

"You do not quite understand me, Louise, since you get offended at my very first word. First of all, do you know to whom the appartments underneath belong?"

"To Monsieur de Guiche, sire, I know."

"Not at all; they are Monsieur de St. Aignan's."

"Are you sure?" cried La Valliere; and this exclamation which escaped from the young girl's joyous heart made the king's heart throb with delight.

"Yes, to St. Aignan, our friend," he said.

"But, sire," returned La Valliere, "I cannot visit Monsieur de St. Aignan's rooms any more than I could Monsieur de Guiche's. It is impossible—impossible."

"And yet, Louise, I should have thought that, under the safeguard of the king, you could venture anything."

"Under the safeguard of the king," she said, with a look full of tenderness.

"You have faith in my word, I hope, Louise."

"Yes, sire, when you are not present; but when you are present, when you speak to me, when I look upon you, I have faith in nothing."

"What can possibly be done to reassure you?"

"It is scarcely respectful, I know, to doubt the king, but you are not the king for me."

"Thank Heaven! I, at least, hope so most fervently; you see how anxiously I am trying to find or invent a means of removing all difficulty. Stay; would the presence of a third person reassure you?"

"The presence of Monsieur de St. Aignan would, certainly."

"Really, Louise, you wound me by your suspicions."

Louise did not answer, she merely looked steadfastly at him with that clear, piercing gaze which penetrates the very heart, and said softly to herself, "Alas! alas! it is not you of whom I am afraid, it is not you upon whom my doubts would fall."

"Well," said the king, sighing, "I agree; and Monsieur

de St. Aignan, who enjoys the inestimable privilege of reassuring you, shall always be present at our conversations, I promise you."

"You promise that, sire?"

"Upon my honor as a gentleman; and you, on your side——"

"Oh, wait, sire, that is not all yet; for such conversations ought, at least, to have a reasonable motive of some kind for Monsieur de St. Aignan."

"Dear Louise, every shade of delicacy of feeling is yours, and my only wish is equal to you on that point. It shall be just as you wish; therefore our conversations shall have a reasonable motive, and I have already hit upon one; so that from to-morrow, if you like——"

"To-morrow?"

"Do you mean that that is not soon enough?" exclaimed the king, caressing La Valliere's hand between his own.

At this moment the sound of steps was heard in the corridor.

"Sire! sire!" cried La Valliere, "some one is coming; do you hear? Oh! fly! fly! I implore you."

The king made but one bound from the chair where he was sitting to his hiding-place behind the screen. He had barely time; for as he drew one of the folds before him the handle of the door was turned, and Montalais appeared at the threshold. As a matter of course, she entered quite naturally, and without any ceremony, for she knew perfectly well that to knock at the door beforehand would be showing a suspicion toward La Valliere which would be displeasing to her. She accordingly entered, and after a rapid glance round the room, whereby she observed two chairs very close to each other, she was so long in shutting the door, which seemed to be difficult to close, one can hardly tell how or why, that the king had ample time to raise the trapdoor, and to descend again to St. Aignan's room.

"Louise," she said to her, "I want to talk to you, and seriously, too."

"Good heavens! my dear Aure, what is the matter now?"

"The matter is, that madame suspects everything."

"Explain yourself."

"Is there any occasion for us to enter into explanations, and do you not understand what I mean? Come, you must have noticed the fluctuations in madame's humor during several days past; you must have noticed how she first kept

you close beside her, then dismissed you, and then sent for you again."

"Yes, I have noticed it, of course."

"Well, it seems that madame has now succeeded in obtaining sufficient information, for she has now gone straight to the point, as there is nothing further left in France to withstand the torrent which sweeps away all obstacles before it; you know what I mean by the torrent?"

La Valliere hid her face in her hands.

"I mean," continued Montalais pitilessly, "that torrent which has burst through the gates of the Carmelites of Chaillot, and overthrown all the prejudices of the court, as well at Fontainebleau as at Paris."

"Alas! alas!" murmured La Valliere, her face still covered by her hands, and her tears streaming through her fingers.

"Oh, don't distress yourself in that manner, for you have only heard half of your troubles."

"In Heaven's name!' exclaimed the young girl, in great anxiety, "what is the matter?"

"Well, then, this is how the matter stands: madame, who can no longer rely upon any further assistance in France, for she has, one after the other, made use of the two queens, of Monsieur, and the whole court, too, now bethinks herself of a certain person who has certain pretended rights over you."

La Valliere became as white as a marble statue.

"This person," continued Montalais, "is not in Paris at this moment; but, if I am not mistaken, is in England."

"Yes, yes," breathed La Valliere, almost overwhelmed with terror.

"And is to be found, I think, at the court of Charles II.; am I right?"

"Yes."

"Well, this evening a letter has been dispatched by madame to St. James', with directions for the courier to go straight on to Hampton Court, which I believe is one of the royal residences, situated about a dozen miles from London."

"Yes; well?"

"Well; as madame writes regularly to London once a fortnight, and as the ordinary courier left for London not more than three days ago, I have been thinking that some serious circumstance could alone have induced her to write again so soon, for you know she is a very indolent correspondent."

"Yes."

"This letter has been written, therefore, something tells me so, at least, on your account."

"On my account?" repeated the unhappy girl mechanically.

"And I, who saw the letter lying on madame's desk, before she sealed it, fancied I could read——"

"What did you fancy you could read?"

"I might possibly have been mistaken, though——"

"Tell me, what was it?"

"The name of Bragelonne."

La Valliere rose hurriedly from her chair, a prey to the most painful agitation. "Montalais," she said, her voice broken by sobs, "all the smiling dreams of youth and innocence have fled already. I have nothing now to conceal, either from you or any one else. My life is exposed to every one's inspection, and can be opened like a book, in which all the world can read, from the king himself to the first passer-by. Aure, dearest Aure, what can I do—what will become of me?"

Montalais approached close to her, and said, "Consult your own heart, of course."

"Well; I do not love Monsieur de Bragelonne; when I say I do not love him, understand that I love him as the most affectionate sister could love the best of brothers; but that is not what he requires, nor what I have promised him."

"In fact, you love the king," said Montalais, "and that is a sufficiently good excuse."

"Yes, I do love the king," hoarsely murmured the young girl, "and I have paid dearly enough for pronouncing those words. And now, Montalais, tell me—what can you do, either for me, or against me, in my present position?"

"You must speak more clearly still."

"What am I to say, then?"

"And so you have nothing very particular to tell me?"

"No!" said Louise, in astonishment.

"Very good; and so all you have to ask me is my advice respecting Monsieur Raoul?"

"Nothing else."

"It is a very delicate subject," replied Montalais.

"No, it is nothing of the kind. Ought I to marry him in order to keep the promise I made, or ought I to continue to listen to the king?"

"You have really placed me in a very difficult position," said Montalais, smiling; "you ask me if you ought to marry

Raoul, whose friend I am, and whom I shall mortally offend in giving my opinion against him; and then, you ask me if you should cease to listen to the king, whose subject I am, and whom I should also offend if I were to advise you in a particular way. Ah, Louise, you seem to hold a difficult position at a very cheap rate."

"You have not understood me, Aure," said La Valliere, wounded by the slightly mocking tone of her companion; "if I were to marry Monsieur de Bragelonne, I should be far from bestowing on him the happiness he deserves; but for the same reason, if I listen to the king he would become the possessor of one indifferently good in very many respects, I admit, but one on whom his affections confers an appearance of value. What I ask you, then, is to tell me some means of disengaging myself honorably either from the one or from the other; or, rather, I ask you, from which side you think I can free myself most honorably."

"My dear Louise," replied Montalais, after a pause, "I am not one of those seven wise men of Greece, and I have no perfectly invariable rules of conduct to govern me; but on the other hand, I have a little experience, and I can assure you that no woman ever asks for advice of the nature which you have just asked me without being in a terrible state of embarrassment. Besides, you have made a solemn promise, which every principle of honor would require you to fulfill; if, therefore, you are embarrassed in consequence of having undertaken such an engagement, it is not a stranger's advice (every one is a stranger to a heart full of love), it is not my advice, I repeat, which will extricate you from your embarrassment. I shall not give it you, therefore; and for a greater reason still—because, were I in your place, I should feel much more embarrassed after the advice than before it. All I can do is, to repeat what I have already told you: shall I assist you?"

"Yes, yes."

"Very well; that is all. Tell me in what way you wish me to help you; tell me for and against whom, in this way we shall not make any blunders?"

"But, first of all," said La Valliere, pressing her companion's hand, "for whom or against whom do you decide?"

"For you, if you are really and truly my friend."

"Are you not madame's *confidante?*"

"A greater reason for being of service to you; if I were not to know what is going on in that direction I should not be of any service at all, and consequently you would not

obtain any advantage from my acquaintance. Friendships live and thrive upon a system of reciprocal benefits."

"The result is, then, that you will remain at the same time madame's friend also?"

"Evidently. Do you complain of that?"

"No," said La Valliere thoughtfully, for that cynical frankness appeared to her an offense addressed both to the woman as well as to the friend.

"All well and good, then," said Montalais, "for in that case, you would be very foolish."

"You will serve me, then?"

"Devotedly so, if you will serve me in return."

"One would almost say that you do not know my heart," said La Valliere, looking at Montalais with her eyes wide open.

"Why, the fact is, that since we have belonged to the court, my dear Louise, we are very much changed."

"In what way?"

"It is very simple. Were you the second Queen of France, yonder, at Blois?"

La Valliere hung down her head, and began to weep. Montalais looked at her in an indefinable manner, and murmured, "Poor girl!" and then, adding, "Poor king!" she kissed Louise on the forehead, and returned to her apartment, where Malicorne was waiting for her.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE PORTRAIT.

In that malady, which is termed love, the paroxysms succeed each other at intervals, always more rapid from the moment the disease declares itself. By and by the paroxysms are less frequent, in proportion as the cure approaches. This being laid down as a general axiom, and as the heading of a particular chapter, we will now proceed with our recital. The next day, the day fixed by the king for the first conversation in St. Aignan's room, La Valliere, on opening one of the folds of the screen, found upon the floor a letter in the king's handwriting. The letter had been passed, through a slit in the floor, from the lower apartment to her own. No indiscreet hand or curious gaze could have brought or did bring this simple paper. This was one of Malicorne's ideas. Having seen how very

serviceable St. Aignan would become to the king on account of his apartment, he did not wish that the courtier should become still more indispensable as a messenger, and so he had, on his own private account, reserved this last post for himself. La Valliere most eagerly read the letter, which fixed two o'clock that same afternoon for the rendezvous, and which indicated the way of raising the trapdoor which was constructed out of the flooring. "Make yourself as beautiful as possible," added the postscript of the letter, words which astonished the young girl, but at the same time reassured her. The hours passed away very slowly, but the time fixed, however, arrived at last. As punctual as the priestess Hero, Louise lifted up the trapdoor at the last stroke of the hour of two, and found the king upon the top steps, waiting for her with the greatest respect, in order to give her his hand to descend. The delicacy and deference shown in this attention affected her very powerfully. At the foot of the staircase the two lovers found the comte, who, with a smile and a low reverence distinguished by the best taste, expressed his thanks to La Valliere for the honor she conferred upon him. Then turning toward the king, he said:

"Sire, our man is here." La Valliere looked at the king with some uneasiness.

"Mademoiselle," said the king, "if I have begged you to do me the honor of coming down here, it was from an interested motive. I have procured a most admirable portrait-painter, who is celebrated for the fidelity of his likenesses, and I wish you to be kind enough to authorize him to paint yours. Besides, if you positively wish it, the portrait shall remain in your own possession."

La Valliere blushed.

"You see," said the king to her, "we shall not be three as you wished, but four instead. And so long as we are not alone, there can be as many present as you please." La Valliere gently pressed her royal lover's hand.

"Shall we pass into the next room, sire?" said St. Aignan, opening the door to let his guests precede him. The king walked behind La Valliere, and fixed his eyes lingeringly and passionately upon her neck as white as snow, upon which her long fair ringlets fell in heavy masses. La Valliere was dressed in a thick silk robe of pearl-gray color, with a tinge of rose, with jet ornaments, which displayed to greater effect the dazzling purity of her skin, holding in her slender and transparent hands a bouquet of heart's-

ease, Bengal roses, and clematis, surrounded with leaves of the tenderest green, above which uprose, like a tiny goblet shedding perfumes, a Haarlem tulip of gray and violet tints, of a pure and beautiful species, which had cost the gardener five years' toil of combinations and the king five thousand francs. Louis had placed this bouquet in La Valliere's hand as he saluted her. In the room, the door of which St. Aignan had just opened, a young man was standing, dressed in a loose velvet coat, with beautiful black eyes and long brown hair. It was the painter; his canvas was quite ready, and his palette prepared for use. He bowed to La Valliere with that grave curiosity of an artist who is studying his model, saluted the king discreetly, as if he did not recognize him, and as he would, consequently, have saluted any other gentleman. Then, leading Mlle. de la Valliere to the seat which he had arranged for her, he begged her to sit down. The young girl assumed an attitude graceful and unrestrained, her hands occupied, and her limbs reclining on cushions; and in order that her gaze might not assume a vague or affected expression, the painter begged her to choose some kind of occupation, so as to engage her attention; whereupon, Louis XIV., smiling, sat down on the cushions at La Valliere's feet; so that she, in the reclining posture she had assumed, leaning back in the armchair, holding her flowers in her hand, and he, with his eyes raised toward her and fixed devouringly on her face—they, both together, formed so charming a group that the artist contemplated it with professional delight, while on his side, St. Aignan regarded them with feelings of envy. The painter sketched rapidly; and very soon, beneath the earliest touches of the brush, there started into life, out of the gray background, the gentle, poetry-breathing face, with its soft calm eyes and delicately tinted cheeks, inframed in the masses of hair which fell about her neck. The lovers, however, spoke but little, and looked at each other a good deal; sometimes their eyes became so languishing in their gaze that the painter was obliged to interrupt his work in order to avoid representing an Erycina instead of a La Valliere. It was on such occasions that St. Aignan came to the rescue, and recited verses, or repeated one of those little tales as Patru related them, and which Tallemant des Réaux wrote so cleverly. Or it might be that La Valliere was fatigued, and the sitting was therefore suspended for awhile; and immediately a tray of precious porcelain, laden with the most beautiful fruits

which could be obtained, and rich wines distilling their bright colors in silver goblets, beautifully chased, served as accessories to the picture of which the painter could but retrace the most ephemeral resemblance. Louis was intoxicated with love, La Valliere with happiness, St. Aignan with ambition, and the painter was storing up recollections for his old age. Two hours passed away in this manner, and four o'clock having struck, La Valliere rose and made a sign to the king. Louis also rose, approached the picture, and addressed a few flattering remarks to the painter. St. Aignan also praised the picture, which, as he pretended, was already beginning to assume an accurate resemblance. La Valliere, in her turn, blushingly thanked the painter, and passed into the next room, where the king followed her, after having previously summoned St. Aignan.

"Will you not come to-morrow?" he said to La Valliere.

"Oh! sire, pray think that some one will be sure to come to my room, and will not find me there."

"Well?"

"What will become of me in that case?"

"You are very apprehensive, Louise."

"But, at all events, suppose madame were to send for me?"

"Oh!" replied the king, "will the day never come when you yourself will tell me to brave everything, so that I may not have to leave you again?"

"On that day, then, sire, I shall be quite out of my mind, and you ought not to believe me."

"To-morrow, Louise."

La Valliere sighed, but, without the courage to oppose her royal lover's wish, she repeated, "To-morrow, then, since you desire it, sire," and with these words she ran up the stairs lightly, and disappeared from her lover's gaze.

"Well, sire? inquired St. Aignan, when she had left.

"Well, St. Aignan; yesterday I thought myself the happiest of men."

"And does your majesty, then, regard yourself to-day," said the comte, smiling, "as the unhappiest of men?"

"No; but my love for her is an unquenchable thirst; in vain do I drink, in vain do I swallow the drops of water which your industry procures for me; the more I drink, the more unquenchable is my thirst."

"Sire, that is in some degree your own fault, and your majesty alone has made the position such as it is."

"You are right."

"In that case, therefore, the means to be happy is to fancy yourself satisfied, and to wait."

"Wait! you know that word, then?"

"There, there, sire—do not despair; I have already been at work on your behalf—I have still other resources in store."

The king shook his head in a despairing manner.

"What, sire! have you not been satisfied hitherto?"

"Oh! yes, indeed, yes, my dear St. Aignan; but find, for Heaven's sake, find some further means yet!"

"Sire, I undertake to do my best, and that is all I can do."

The king wished to see the portrait again, as he was unable to see the original. He pointed out several alterations to the painter, and left the room, and then St. Aignan dismissed the artist. The easel, paints, and painter himself, had scarcely gone, when Malicorne showed his head at the doorway. He was received by St. Aignan with open arms, but still with a little sadness, for the cloud which had passed across the royal sun veiled, in its turn, the faithful satellite, and Malicorne at a glance perceived the melancholy look which was visible upon St. Aignan's face.

"Oh, Monsieur le Comte," he said, "how sad you seem!"

"And good reason, too, my dear Monsieur Malicorne. Will you believe that the king is not satisfied?"

"Not satisfied with his staircase, do you mean?"

"Oh, no; on the contrary, he is delighted with the staircase."

"The decoration of the apartments, I suppose, don't please him?"

"Oh! he has not even thought of that. No, indeed, it seems that what has dissatisfied the king——"

"I will tell you, Monsieur le Comte—he is dissatisfied at finding himself the fourth person at a rendezvous of this kind. How is it possible you could not have guessed that?"

"Why, how is it likely I could have done so, dear Monsieur Malicorne, when I followed the king's instructions to the very letter?"

"Did his majesty really insist on your being present?"

"Positively so."

"And also required that the painter, whom I met downstairs just now, should be here, too?"

"He insisted upon it."

"In that case, I can easily understand why his majesty is dissatisfied."

"What! dissatisfied that I have so punctually and so literally obeyed his orders? I don't understand you."

Malicorne began to scratch his ear, as he asked, "What time did the king fix for the rendezvous in your apartments?"

"Two o'clock."

"And you were waiting for the king?"

"Ever since half-past one; it would have been a fine thing, indeed, to have been unpunctual with his majesty."

Malicorne, notwithstanding his respect for St. Aignan, could not resist shrugging his shoulders.

"And the painter," he said, "did the king wish him to be here at two o'clock, also?"

"No; but I had him waiting here from midday. Far better, you know, for a painter to be kept waiting a couple of hours than the king a single minute."

Malicorne began to laugh to himself.

"Come, dear Monsieur Malicorne," said St. Aignan, "laugh less at me, and speak a little more freely, I beg."

"Well, then, Monsieur le Comte, if you wish the king to be a little more satisfied the next time he comes——"

"'*Ventre saint-gris!*' as his father used to say; of course I wish it."

"Well, all you have to do is, when the king comes to-morrow, to be obliged to go away on a most pressing matter of business, which cannot possibly be postponed, and stay away for twenty minutes."

"What! leave the king alone for twenty minutes?" cried St. Aignan, in alarm.

"Very well; do as you like; don't pay any attention to what I say," said Malicorne, moving toward the door.

"Nay, nay, dear Monsieur Malicorne; on the contrary, go on—I begin to understand you. But the painter——"

"Oh! the painter must be half an hour late."

"Half an hour—do you really think so?"

"Yes, I do, decidedly."

"Very well, then; I will do as you tell me."

"And my opinion is that you will be doing perfectly right. Will you allow me to come and inquire to-morrow, a little?"

"Of course."

"I have the honor to be your most respectful servant, Monsieur de St. Aignan," said Malicorne, bowing profoundly, and retiring from the room backward.

"There is no doubt that fellow has more invention than I

have," said St. Aignan, as if compelled by his conviction to admit it.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

HAMPTON COURT.

The revelation of which we have been witnesses, that Montalais made to La Valliere in a preceding chapter, very naturally makes us return to the principal hero of this tale, a poor wandering knight, roving about at the king's caprice. If our readers will be good enough to follow us, we will, in his company, cross that strait more stormy than the Euripus—that which separates Calais from Dover; we will speed across that green and fertile country, with its numerous little streams; through Maidstone, and many other villages and towns, each prettier than the other, and finally arrive at London. From thence, like bloodhounds following a track, after having ascertained that Raoul had made his first stay at Whitehall, his second at St. James', and having learned that he had been warmly received by Monk, and introduced into the best society of Charles II.'s court, we will follow him to one of Charles II.'s summer residences, near the town of Kingston, at Hampton Court, situated on the Thames. The river is not, at that spot, the boastful highway which bears upon its broad bosom its thousands of travelers; nor are its waters black and troubled as those of Cocytus, as it boastfully asserts, "I, too, am the sea." No; at Hampton Court it is a soft and murmuring stream, with moss-grown banks, reflecting, in its broad mirror, the wil-'ows and beeches which ornament its sides, and on which may occasionally be seen a light bark indolently reclining among the tall reeds, in a little creek formed of alders and forget-me-nots. The surrounding country on all sides seemed smiling in happiness and wealth; the brick cottages, from whose chimneys the blue smoke was slowly ascending in wreaths, peeped forth from the belts of green holly which environed them; children dressed in red frocks appeared and disappeared amid the high grass, like poppies bowed by the gentle breath of the passing breeze. The sheep, ruminating with closed eyes, lay lazily about under the shadow of the stunted aspens, while far and near the kingfisher, clad in emerald and gold, skimmed swiftly along the surface of the water, like a magic ball, heedlessly touch-

ing, as he passed, the line of his brother angler, who sat watching in his boat the fish as they rose to the surface of the sparkling stream. High above this paradise of dark shadows and soft light arose the palace of Hampton Court, which had been built by Wolsey—a residence which the haughty cardinal had been obliged, timid courtier that he was, to offer to his master, Henry VIII., who had frowned with envy and feelings of cupidity at the aspect of the new palace. Hampton Court, with its brick walls, its large windows, its handsome iron gates, as well as its curious bell-turrets, its retired, covered walks, and interior fountains, like those of the Alhambra, was a perfect bower of roses, jasmine, and clematis. Every sense of sight and smell particularly, was gratified, and formed a most charming framework for the picture of love which Charles II. unrolled among the voluptuous paintings of Titian, of Pordenone, and of Vandyke; the same Charles whose father's portrait —the martyr king—was hanging in his gallery, and who could show upon the wainscots of the various apartments the holes made by the balls of the puritanical followers of Cromwell, on the 24th of August, 1648, at the time they had brought Charles I. prisoner to Hampton Court. There it was that the king, intoxicated with pleasure and amusements, held his court—he who, a poet in feeling, thought himself justified in redeeming, by a whole day of voluptuousness, every minute which had been formerly passed in anguish and misery. It was not the soft greensward of Hampton Court—so soft that it almost resembled the richest velvet in the thickness of its texture—nor was it the beds of flowers, with their variegated hues, which encircled the foot of every tree, with rose-trees many feet in height, embracing most lovingly their trunks—nor even the enormous lime-trees, whose branches swept the earth like willows, offering a ready concealment for love or reflection beneath the shade of their foliage—it was none of these things for which Charles II. loved his palace of Hampton Court. Perhaps it might have been that beautiful sheet of water, which the cool breeze rippled like the wavy undulations of Cleopatra's hair, waters bedecked with cresses and white water-lilies, with hardy bulbs which, half-unfolding themselves beneath the sun's warm rays, reveal the golden-colored germs which lie concealed in their milk-white covering—murmuring waters, on the bosom of which the black swans majestically floated; and the restless water-fowl, with their tender broods covered with silken down, darted rest-

lessly in every direction, in pursuit of the insects among the flags, or the frogs in their mossy retreats. Perhaps it might have been the enormous hollies, with their dark and tender green foliage; or the bridges which united the banks of the canals in their embrace; or the fawns browsing in the endless avenues of the park; or the numberless birds which hopped about the gardens, or flew from branch to branch, amid the dense foliage of the trees.

It might well have been any of these charms, for Hampton Court possessed them all; and possessed, too, almost forests of white roses, which climbed and trailed along the lofty trellises, showering down upon the ground their snowy leaves rich with odorous perfumes. But no, what Charles II. most loved in Hampton Court was the charming figures who, when midday was passed, flitted to and fro along the broad terraces of the gardens; like Louis XIV., he had had their wealth of beauties painted for his cabinet by one of the great artists of the period—an artist who well knew the secret of transferring to canvas a ray of light which had escaped from their beaming eyes laden with love and love's delights.

The day of our arrival at Hampton Court is almost as clear and bright as a summer's day in France; the atmosphere is laden with the delicious perfume of the geraniums, sweet-peas, syringas, and heliotrope which are scattered in profusion around. It is past midday, and the king, having dined, after his return from hunting, paid a visit to Lady Castlemaine, the lady who was reputed at the time to hold his heart in bondage; and with this proof of his devotion discharged, he was readily permitted to pursue his infidelities until evening arrived. Love and amusement ruled the whole court; it was the period when ladies would seriously interrogate their ruder companions as to their opinions upon a foot more or less captivating, according to whether it wore a pink or green silk stocking—for it was the period when Charles II. had declared that there was no hope of safety for a woman who wore green silk stockings, because Miss Lucy Stewart wore them of that color. While the king is endeavoring in all directions to inculcate others with his preferences on this point, we will ourselves bend our steps toward an avenue of beech-trees opposite the terrace, and listen to the conversation of a young girl in a dark-colored dress, who is walking with another of about her own age dressed in lilac and dark blue. They crossed a beautiful lawn in the middle of which arose a fountain,

with the figure of a siren executed in bronze, and strolled on, talking as they went, toward the terrace, along which, looking out upon the park, and interspersed at frequent intervals, were erected summer-houses, various in form and ornaments; these summer-houses were nearly all occupied; the two young women passed on, the one blushing deeply, while the other seemed dreamingly silent. At last, having reached the end of the terrace which looks on the river, and finding there a cool retreat, they sat down close to each other.

"Where are we going, Stewart?" said the younger to her companion.

"My dear Grafton, we are going where you yourself led the way."

"I?"

"Yes, you; to the extremity of the palace, toward that seat yonder, where the young Frenchman is seated, wasting his time in sighs and lamentations."

Miss Mary Grafton hurriedly said:

"No, no; I am not going there."

"Why not?"

"Let us go back, Stewart."

"Nay, on the contrary, let us go on, and have an explanation."

"About what?"

"About how it happens that the Vicomte de Bragelonne always accompanies you in all your walks, as you invariably accompany him in his."

"And you conclude either that he loves me, or that I love him?"

"Why not? He is a most agreeable and charming companion. No one hears me, I hope," said Lucy Stewart, as she turned round with a smile, which indicated, moreover, that her uneasiness on the subject was not extreme.

"No, no," said Mary, "the king is engaged in his summer-house with the Duke of Buckingham."

"Oh! apropos of the duke, Mary, it seems he has shown you great attention since his return from France; how is your own heart in that direction?"

Mary Grafton shrugged her shoulders with seeming indifference.

"Well, well, I will ask Bragelonne about that," said Stewart, laughing; "let us go and find him at once."

"What for?"

"I wish to speak to him."

"Not yet; one word before you do; come, Stewart, you

who know so many of the king's secrets, tell me why Monsieur de Bragelonne is in England?"

"Because he was sent as an envoy from one sovereign to another."

"That may be; but, seriously, although politics do not much concern us, we know enough to be satisfied that Monsieur de Bragelonne has no mission of any serious import here."

"Well, then, listen," said Stewart, with assumed gravity; "for your sake, I am going to betray a state secret. Shall I tell you the nature of the letter which King Louis XIV. gave Monsieur de Bragelonne for King Charles II.? I will; these are the very words: 'My brother, the bearer of this is a gentleman attached to my court, and the son of one whom you regard most warmly. Treat him kindly, I beg, and try and make him like England.' "

"Did it say that?"

"Word for word—or something very like it. I will not answer for the form, but the substance I am sure of."

"Well, and what conclusion do you, or rather, what conclusion does the king draw from that?"

"That the King of France has his own reasons for removing Monsieur de Bragelonne, and for getting him married—somewhere else than in France."

"So that, then, in consequence of this letter——"

"King Charles received Monsieur de Bragelonne, as you are aware, in the most distinguished and friendly manner; the handsomest apartments in Whitehall were allotted to him; and as you are the most valuable and precious person in his court, inasmuch as you have rejected his heart—nay, do not blush—he wished you to take a fancy to this Frenchman, and he was desirous to confer upon him so costly a prize. And this is the reason why you, the heiress of three hundred thousand pounds, a future duchess, and one so beautiful, and so good, have been thrown in Bragelonne's way, in all the promenades and parties of pleasure to which he was invited. In fact, it was a plot—a kind of conspiracy."

Mary Grafton smiled with that charming expression which was habitual to her, and, pressing her companion's arm, said:

"Thank the king, Lucy."

"Yes, yes; but the Duke of Buckingham is jealous, so take care."

Hardly had she pronounced these words than the duke

appeared from one of the pavilions on the terrace, and approaching the two girls, with a smile, said:

"You are mistaken, Miss Lucy; I am not jealous, and the proof, Miss Mary, is yonder, in the person of Monsieur de Bragelonne himself, who ought to be the cause of my jealousy, but who is dreaming in pensive solitude. Poor fellow! Allow me to leave you for a few minutes, while I avail myself of those few minutes to converse with Miss Lucy Stewart, to whom I have something to say." And then, bowing to Lucy, he added: "Will you do me the honor to accept my hand, in order that I may lead you to the king, who is waiting for us?"

With these words Buckingham, still smiling, took Miss Stewart's hand and led her away. When by herself, Mary Grafton, her head gently inclined toward her shoulder, with that indolent gracefulness of action which distinguishes young English girls, remained for a moment with her eyes fixed on Raoul, but as if uncertain what to do. At last, after first blushing violently and then turning deathly pale, thus revealing the internal combat which assailed her heart, she seemed to make up her mind to adopt a decided course, and with a tolerably firm step advanced toward the seat on which Raoul was reclining, buried in the profoundest meditation, as we have already said. The sound of Miss Mary's steps, though they could be hardly heard upon the greensward, awakened Raoul from his musing attitude; he turned round, perceived the young girl, and walked forward to meet the companion whom his happy destiny had thrown in his way.

"I have been sent to you, monsieur," said Mary Grafton; "will you accept me?"

"To whom is my gratitude due for so great a happiness?" inquired Raoul.

"To the Duke of Buckingham," replied Mary, affecting a gayety she did not really feel.

"To the Duke of Buckingham, do you say?—he who so passionately seeks your charming society? Am I really to believe you are serious, mademoiselle?"

"The fact is, monsieur, you perceive that everything seems to conspire to make us pass the best, or rather the longest, part of our days together. Yesterday it was the king who desired me to beg you to seat yourself next to me at dinner; to-day it is the Duke of Buckingham who begs me to come and place myself near you on this seat."

"And he has gone away in order to leave us together?" asked Raoul, with some embarrassment.

"Look yonder, at the turning of that path; he is just out of sight, with Miss Stewart. Are these polite attentions usual in France, Monsieur le Comte?"

"I cannot very precisely say what people do in France, mademoiselle, for I can hardly be called a Frenchman. I have resided in many countries, and almost always as a soldier; and then I have spent a long period of my life in the country. I am almost a savage."

"You do not like your residence in England, I fear?"

"I scarcely know," said Raoul inattentively, and sighing deeply at the same time.

"What! you do not know?"

"Forgive me," said Raoul, shaking his head, and collecting his thoughts, "I did not hear you."

"Oh!" said the young girl, sighing in her turn, "how wrong the duke was to send me here!"

"Wrong?" said Raoul. "Perhaps so; for I am but a rude, uncouth companion, and my society annoys you. The duke was, indeed, very wrong to send you."

"It is precisely," replied Mary Grafton, in a clear, calm voice, "because your society does not annoy me that the duke was wrong to send me to you."

It was now Raoul's turn to blush.

"But," he resumed, "how happens it that the Duke of Buckingham should send you to me, and why should you have come? The duke loves you, and you love him."

"No," replied Mary seriously; "the duke does not love me, because he is in love with the Duchesse d'Orléans; and, as for myself, I have no affection for the duke."

Raoul looked at the young lady with astonishment.

"Are you a friend of the Duke of Buckingham?" she inquired.

"The duke has honored me by calling me so ever since we met in France."

"You are simple acquaintances, then?"

"No; for the duke is the most intimate friend of one whom I regard as a brother."

"The Duc de Guiche?"

"Yes."

"He who is in love with Madame la Duchesse d'Orléans."

"Oh! what is that you are saying?"

"And who loves him in return," continued the young girl quietly.

Raoul bent down his head, and Mary Grafton, sighing deeply, continued:

"They are very happy. But, leave me, Monsieur de Bragelonne, for the Duke of Buckingham has given you a very troublesome commission in offering me as a companion in your promenade. Your heart is elsewhere, and it is with the greatest difficulty you can be charitable enough to lend me your attention. Confess truly; it would be unfair on your part, vicomte, not to confess it."

"Madame, I do confess it."

She looked at him steadily. He was so noble and so handsome in his bearing, his eye revealed so much gentleness, candor, and resolution, that the idea could not possibly enter her mind that he was either rudely discourteous or a mere simpleton. She only perceived clearly enough that he loved another woman, and not herself, with the whole strength of his heart.

"Ah! I now understand you," she said; "you have left your heart behind you in France."

Raoul bowed.

"The duke is aware of your affection."

"No one knows it," replied Raoul.

"Why, therefore, do you tell me? Nay, answer me."

"I cannot."

"It is for me, then, to anticipate an explanation; you do not wish to tell me anything, because you are now convinced that I do not love the duke; because you see that I possibly might have loved you; because you are a gentleman of noble and delicate sentiments; and because, instead of accepting, even were it for the mere amusement of the passing hour, a hand which is almost pressed upon you, and because, instead of meeting my smiles with a smiling lip, you, who are young, have preferred to tell me, whom men have called beautiful, 'My heart is far away in France.' For this I thank you, Monsieur de Bragelonne; you are, indeed, a noble-hearted, noble-minded man, and I regard you yet more for it. As a friend only. And now let us cease speaking of myself, and talk of your own affairs. Forget that I have ever spoken to you of myself; tell me why you are sad, and why you have become more than usually so during these four past days?"

Raoul was deeply and sensibly moved by her sweet and melancholy tone; and as he could not at the moment find a word to say, the young girl again came to his assistance.

"Pity me," she said. "My mother was born in France, and I can truly affirm that, I too, am French in blood as well as in feeling; but the heavy atmosphere and character-

istic gloom of England seem to weigh like a burden upon me. Sometimes my dreams are golden-hued and full of wondrous enjoyment, but suddenly a mist arises and overspreads my dreams, and blots them out forever. Such, indeed, is the case at the present moment. Forgive me; I have now said enough on that subject; give me your hand, and relate your griefs to me as to a friend."

"You say you are French in heart and soul."

"Yes; not only I repeat it, that my mother was French, but further still, as my father, a friend of King Charles I., was exiled in France, I, during the trial of that prince, as well as during the Protector's life, was brought up in Paris; at the Restoration of King Charles II. my poor father returned to England, where he died almost immediately afterward; and then the king created me a duchess, and has dowered me according to my rank."

"Have you any relations in France?" Raoul inquired, with the deepest interest.

"I have a sister there, my senior by seven or eight years, who was married in France, and was early left a widow; her name is Madame de Bellière. Do you know her?" she added, observing Raoul start suddenly.

"I have heard her name mentioned."

"She, too, loves with her whole heart; and her last letters inform me that she is happy, and her affection is, I conclude, returned. I told you, Monsieur de Bragelonne, that although I possess half of her nature, I do not share her happiness. But let us now speak of yourself; whom do you love in France?"

"A young girl as soft and as pure as a lily."

"But if she loves you, why are you sad?"

"I have been told that she has ceased to love me."

"You do not believe it, I trust?"

"He who wrote me so does not sign his letter."

"An anonymous denunciation! some treachery, be assured," said Miss Grafton.

"Stay," said Raoul, showing the young girl a letter which he had read over a thousand times; she took it from his hand and read as follows:

"Vicomte: You are perfectly right to amuse yourself yonder with the lovely faces of Charles II.'s court, for at Louis XIV.'s court, the castle in which your affections are enshrined is being besieged. Stay in London altogether, poor vicomte, or return without delay to Paris."

"There is no signature," said Miss Mary.

"None."

"Believe it not, then."

"Very good; but here is a second letter, from my friend De Guiche, which says, 'I am lying here wounded and ill. Return, Raoul, oh, return!' "

"What do you intend doing?" inquired the young girl, with a feeling of oppression at her heart.

"My intention, as soon as I received this letter, was immediately to take my leave of the king."

"When did you receive it?"

"The day before yesterday."

"It is dated from Fontainebleau."

"A singular circumstance, do you not think, for the court is now at Paris? At all events, I would have set off; but when I mentioned my intention to the king, he began to laugh, and said to me, 'How comes it, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur, that you think of leaving? Has your sovereign recalled you?' I colored, naturally enough, for I was confused by the question; for the fact is, the king himself sent me here, and I have received no order to return."

Mary frowned in deep thought, and said:

"Do you remain, then?"

"I must, mademoiselle."

"Do you ever receive any letters from her to whom you are so devoted?"

"Never."

"Never, do you say? Does she not love you, then?"

"At least, she has not written to me since my departure, although she used occasionally to write to me before. I trust she may have been prevented."

"Hush! the duke is here."

And Buckingham at that moment was seen at the end of the walk, approaching toward them, alone and smiling; he advanced slowly, and held out his hands to them both.

"Have you arrived at an understanding?" he said.

"About what?"

"About whatever might render you happy, dear Mary, and make Raoul less miserable."

"I do not understand you, my lord," said Raoul.

"That is my view of the subject, Miss Mary; do you wish me to mention it before Monsieur de Bragelonne?" he added, with a smile.

"If you mean," replied the young girl haughtily, "that I was not indisposed to love Monsieur de Bragelonne, that is useless, for I have told him so myself."

Buckingham reflected for a moment, and without seeming in any way discountenanced, as she expected, he said:

"My reason for leaving you with Monsieur de Bragelonne was that I thoroughly knew your refined delicacy of feeling, no less than the perfect loyalty of your mind and heart, and I hoped that Monsieur de Bragelonne's cure might be effected by the hands of a physician such as you are."

"But, my lord, before you spoke of Monsieur de Bragelonne's heart, you spoke to me of your own. Do you mean to effect the cure of two hearts at the same time?"

"Perfectly true, madame; but you will do me the justice to admit that I have long discontinued a useless pursuit, acknowledging that my own wound is incurable."

"My lord," said Mary, collecting herself for a moment before she spoke, 'Monsieur de Bragelonne is happy, for he loves and is beloved. He has no need of such a physcian as I can be."

"Monsieur de Bragelonne," said Buckingham, "is on the very eve of experiencing a serious misfortune, and he has greater need than ever of sympathy and affection."

"Explain yourself, my lord," inquired Raoul anxiously.

"No; gradually I will explain myself; but if you desire it, I can tell Miss Grafton what you may not listen to yourself."

"My lord, you are putting me to the torture; you know something you wish to conceal from me?"

"I know that Miss Mary Grafton is the most charming object that a heart ill at ease could possibly meet with in its way through life."

"I have already told you that the Vicomte de Bragelonne loves elsewhere," said the young girl.

"He is wrong, then."

"Do you assume to know, my lord, that I am wrong?"

"Yes."

"Whom is it that he loves, then?" exclaimed the young girl.

"He loves a woman who is unworthy of him," said Buckingham, with that calm, collected manner peculiar to an Englishman.

Miss Grafton uttered a cry, which, together with the remark that Buckingham had that moment made, spread over De Bragelonne's features a deathly paleness, arising from the sudden surprise, and also from a vague fear of impending misfortune.

"My lord," he exclaimed, "you have just pronounced

words which compel me, without a moment's delay, to seek their explanation at Paris."

"You will remain here," said Buckingham, "because you have no right to leave; and no one has the right to quit the service of the king for that of any woman, even were she as worthy of being loved as Mary Grafton is."

"You will tell me all, then?"

"I will, on condition that you will remain."

"I will remain, if you will promise to speak openly and without reserve."

Thus far had their conversation proceeded, and Buckingham in all probability was on the point of revealing, not indeed all that had taken place, but at least all he was aware of, when one of the king's attendants appeared at the end of the terrace, and advanced toward the summer-house where the king was sitting with Lucy Stewart. A courier followed him, covered with dust from head to foot, and who seemed as if he had but a few moments before dismounted from his horse.

"The courier from France! Madame's courier!" exclaimed Raoul, recognizing the princess' livery; and while the attendant and the courtier advanced toward the king, Buckingham and Miss Grafton exchanged a look full of intelligence with each other.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE COURIER FROM MADAME.

Charles II. was busily engaged in proving, or in endeavoring to prove, to Miss Stewart that she was the only person for whom he cared at all, and, consequently, he was swearing for her an affection similar to which his ancestor, Henry IV., had entertained for Gabrielle. Unfortunately for Charles II., he had hit upon an unlucky day, upon a day when Miss Stewart had taken it into her head to make him jealous, and therefore, instead of being touched by his offer, as the king had hoped, she laughed heartily.

"Oh! sire, sire," she cried, laughing all the while, "if I were to be unfortunate enough to ask you for a proof of the affection you profess, how easy it would be to see that you are telling a falsehood."

"Nay, listen to me," said Charles; "you know my cartoons by Raphael; you know whether I care for them or

not; the whole world envies me their possession, as you well know also; my father got Vandyke to purchase them. Would you like me to send them to your house this very day?"

"Oh, no!" replied the young girl; "pray keep them yourself, sire; my house is far too small to accommodate such visitors."

"In that case you shall have Hampton Court to put the cartoons in."

"Be less generous sire, and learn to love a little while longer, that is all I have to ask you."

"I shall never cease to love you; is not that enough?"

"You are laughing, sire."

"Do you wish me to weep, then?"

"No; but I should like to see you a little more melancholy."

"Thank Heaven, I have been so long enough; fourteen years of exile, poverty, and misery, I think I may well regard it as a debt discharged; besides, melancholy makes people look so plain."

"Far from that, for look at the young Frenchman."

"What! the Vicomte de Bragelonne? Are you smitten, too? By Heaven! they will all become mad about him, one after the other; but he, on the contrary, has a reason for being melancholy."

"Why so?"

"Oh, indeed! you wish me to betray state secrets, do you?"

"If I wish it, you must do it, since you told me you were quite ready to do everything I wished."

"Well, then, he is bored in his own country. Does that satisfy you?"

"Bored?"

"Yes; a proof that he is a simpleton. I allow him to fall in love with Miss Mary Grafton, and he feels bored. Can you believe it?"

"Very good; it seems, then, that if you were to find Miss Lucy Stewart indifferent to you, you would console yourself by falling in love with Miss Mary Grafton."

"I don't say that; in the first place, you know that Mary Grafton does not care for me; besides, a man can only console himself for a lost affection by the discovery of a new one. Again, however, I repeat, the question is not of myself, but of that young man. One might almost be tempted to call the girl he has left behind him a Helen—a Helen before her introduction to Paris, of course."

"He has left some one, then?"

"That is to say, some one has left him."

"Poor fellow! so much the worse!"

"What do you mean by 'so much the worse'?"

"Why not? why did he leave?"

"Do you think it was of his own wish or will that he left?"

"Was he obliged to leave, then?"

"He left Paris under orders, my dear Stewart; and prepare to be surprised—by express orders of the king."

"Ah! I begin to see now."

"At least, say nothing at all about it."

"You know very well that I am quite as discreet as any man could be. And so the king sent him away?"

"Yes."

"And during his absence he takes his mistress away from him?"

"Yes; and, will you believe it? the silly fellow, instead of thanking the king, is making himself miserable."

"What! thank the king for depriving him of the woman he loves! Really, sire, yours is a most ungallant speech."

"But, pray understand me. If she whom the king had run off with was either a Miss Grafton or a Miss Stewart, I should be of his opinion; nay, I should even think him not half miserable enough; but she is a little thin, lame thing. Deuce take such fidelity as that! Surely, one can hardly understand how a man can refuse a girl who is rich for one who is poverty itself—a girl who loves him for one who deceives and betrays him."

"Do you think that Mary seriously wishes to please the vicomte, sire?"

"I do, indeed."

"Very good! the vicomte will settle down in England, for Mary has a clear head, and when she fixes her mind upon anything she does so thoroughly."

"Take care, my dear Miss Stewart; if the vicomte has any idea of adopting our country, he has not long to do so, for it was only the day before yesterday that he again asked me for permission to leave."

"Which you refused him, I suppose?"

"I should think so, indeed; my royal brother is far too anxious for his absence; and, for myself, my *amour propre* is enlisted on his side, for I will never have it said that I had held out as a bait to this young man the noblest and gentlest creature in England——"

"You are very gallant sire," said Miss Stewart, with a pretty pout.

"I do not allude to Miss Stewart, for she is worthy a king's devotion; and since she has captivated me, I trust that no one else will be caught by her; I say, therefore, finally, that the attention I have shown this young man will not have been thrown away; he will stay with us here, will marry here, or I am very much mistaken."

"And I hope that when he is once married and settled, instead of being angry with your majesty, he will be grateful to you, for every one tries his utmost to please him; even the Duke of Buckingham, whose brilliancy, which is harldy credible, seems to pale before that of this young Frenchman."

"And including Miss Stewart even, who calls him the most finished gentleman she ever saw."

"Stay, sire; you have spoken quite enough, and quite highly enough, of Miss Grafton, to overlook what I may have said about De Bragelonne. But, by the bye, sire, your kindness for some time past astonishes me; you think of those who are absent, you forgive those who have done wrong; in fact, you are, as nearly as possible, perfect. How does it happen——"

"It is because you allow yourself to be loved," he said, beginning to laugh.

"Oh! there must be some other reason."

"Well, I am doing all I can to oblige my brother Louis XIV."

"Nay, I must have another reason."

"Well, then, the true motive is that Buckingham strongly recommended the young man to me, saying: 'Sire, I begin by yielding up all claim to Miss Grafton; I pray you follow my example.'"

"The duke is, indeed, a true gentleman."

"Oh, of course, of course; it is Buckingham's turn now, I suppose, to turn your head. You seem determined to cross me in everything to-day."

At this moment some one scratched at the door.

"Who is it who presumes to interrupt us?" exclaimed Charles impatiently.

"Really, sire, you are extremely vain with your 'who is it who presumes?' and in order to punish you for it——"

She went to the door and opened it.

"It is a courier from France," said Miss Stewart.

"A courier from France!" exclaimed Charles; "from my sister, perhaps?"

"Yes, sire," said the usher; "a special messenger."

"Let him come in at once," said Charles.

"You have a letter for me," said the king to the courier, as he entered, "from the Duchess of Orléans?"

"Yes, sire," replied the courier, "and so urgent in its nature that I have only been twenty-six hours in bringing it to your majesty, and yet I lost three-quarters of an hour at Calais."

"Your zeal shall not be forgotten," said the king, as he opened the letter. When he had read it he burst out laughing, and exclaimed: "Upon my word, I am at a loss to understand anything about it."

He then read the letter a second time, Miss Stewart assuming a manner marked by the greatest reserve, and doing her utmost to restrain her ardent curiosity.

"Francis," said the king to his valet, "see that this excellent fellow is well taken care of and sleeps soundly, and that on waking to-morrow morning he finds a purse of fifty sovereigns by his bedside."

"Sire!" said the courier, amazed.

"Begone, begone; my sister was perfectly right in desiring you to use the utmost diligence; the affair was most pressing."

And he again began to laugh louder than ever. The courier, the valet, and Miss Stewart hardly knew what sort of countenance to assume.

"Ah!" said the king, throwing himself back in his arm-chair; "when I think that you have knocked up—how many horses?"

"Two."

"Two horses to bring this intelligence to me. That will do; you can leave us now." The courier retired with the valet. Charles went to the window, which he opened, and leaning forward, called out:

"Duke! Buckingham! come here, there's a good fellow."

The duke hurried to him, in obedience to the summons; but when he reached the door, and perceived Miss Stewart, he hesitated to enter.

"Come in and shut the door," said the king.

The duke obeyed, and, perceiving in what an excellent humor the king was, he advanced, smiling, toward him.

"Well, my dear duke, how do you get on with your Frenchman?"

"Sire, I am in the most perfect state of utter despair about him."

"Why so?"

"Because charming Miss Grafton is willing to marry him, but he is unwilling."

"Why, he is a perfect Bœtian!" cried Miss Stewart. "Let him say either 'Yes,' or 'No,' and let the affair end."

"But," said Buckingham seriously, "you know, or you ought to know, madame, that Monsieur de Bragelonne is in love in another direction."

"In that case," said the king, coming to Miss Stewart's help, "nothing is easier; let him say 'No,' then."

"Very true; and I have proved to him he was wrong not to say 'Yes.'".

"You told him candidly, I suppose, that La Valliere was deceiving him?"

"Yes, without the slightest reserve; and, as soon as I had done so, he gave a start, as if he were going to clear the Channel at a bound."

"At all events," said Miss Stewart, "he has done something; and a very good thing, too, upon my word."

"But," said Buckingham, "I stopped him; I have left him and Miss Mary in conversation together, and I sincerely trust that now he will not leave, as he seemed to have had an idea of doing."

"An idea of leaving England?" cried the king.

"I, at one moment, hardly thought that any human power could have prevented him; but Miss Mary's eyes are now bent fully on him, and he will remain."

"Well, that is the very thing which deceives you, Buckingham," said the king, with a peal of laughter; "the poor fellow is predestined."

"Predestined to what?"

"If it were to be simply to be deceived, that is nothing; but, to look at him, it is a great deal."

"At a distance, and with Miss Grafton's aid, the blow will be warded off."

"Far from it, far from it; neither distance nor Miss Grafton's help will be of the slightest avail. Bragelonne will set off for Paris within an hour's time."

Buckingham started, and Miss Stewart opened her eyes very wide in astonishment.

"But, sire," said the duke, "your majesty knows that it is impossible."

"That is to say, my dear Buckingham, that it is impossible until the contrary happens."

"Do not forget, sire, that the young man is a perfect lion, and that his wrath is terrible."

"I don't deny it, my dear duke."

"And that if he sees that his misfortune is certain, so much the worse for the author of it."

"I don't deny it; but what the deuce am I to do?"

"Were it the king himself," cried Buckingham, "I would not answer for him."

"Oh, the king has his musketeers to take care of him," said Charles quietly; "I know that perfectly well, for I was kept dancing attendance in his antechamber at Blois. He has Monsieur d'Artagnan, and what better guardian could the king have than Monsieur d'Artagnan? I should make myself perfectly easy with twenty storms of passion, such as Bragelonne might display, if I had four guardians like D'Artagnan."

"But I entreat your majesty, who is so good and kind, to reflect a little."

"Stay," said Charles II., presenting the letter to the duke, "read, and answer yourself what you would do in my place."

Buckingham slowly took hold of madame's letter, and, trembling with emotion, read the following words:

"For your own sake, for mine, for the honor and safety of every one, send Monsieur de Bragelonne back to France immediately. Your devoted sister,

"HENRIETTE."

"Well, Villiers, what do you say?"

"Really, sire, I have nothing to say?" replied the duke, stupefied.

"Nay, would you, of all persons," said the king artfully, "advise me not to listen to my sister when she writes so urgently?"

"Oh, no, no, sire; and yet——"

"You've not read the postscript, Villiers; it is under the fold of the letter, and escaped me at first; read it."

And as the duke turned down a fold of the letter, he read:

"A thousand kind remembrances to those who love me."

The duke's head sank gradually on his breast; the paper trembled in his fingers, as if it had been changed to lead. The king paused for a moment, and, seeing that Buckingham did not speak:

"He must follow his destiny, as we ours," continued the king; "every man has his share of grief in this world, I have had my own—I have had that of others who belong to me—and have thus had a double weight of woe to endure. But the deuce take all my cares now! Go, and bring our friend here, Villiers."

The duke opened the trellised door of the summer-house, and pointing at Raoul and Mary, who were walking together side by side, said:

"What a cruel blow, sire, for poor Miss Grafton!"

"Nonsense! call him," said Charles II., knitting his black brows together, "every one seems to be sentimental here. There, look at Miss Stewart who is wiping her eyes —now deuce take the French fellow!"

The duke called to Raoul, and taking Miss Grafton by the hand, he led her toward the king.

"Monsieur de Bragelonne," said Charles II., "did you not ask me, the day before yesterday, for permission to return to Paris?"

"Yes, sire," replied Raoul, puzzled by this address.

"And I refused you, I think?"

"Yes, sire."

"Were you not angry with me for it?"

"No, sire: your majesty had no doubt excellent reasons for withholding it, for you are so wise and so good that everything you do is well done."

"I alleged, I believe, as a reason, that the King of France had not recalled you?"

"Yes, sire, that was the reason you assigned."

"Well, Monsieur de Bragelonne, I have reflected over the matter since; if the king did not, in fact, fix your return, he begged me to render your sojourn in England as agreeable as possible, since, however, you ask my permission to return, it is because your longer residence in England is no longer agreeable to you."

"I do not say that, sire."

"No; but your request, at least," said the king, "signified that another place of residence would be more agreeable to you than this."

At this moment Raoul turned toward the door, against which Miss Grafton was leaning, pale and sorrow-stricken; her other arm was passed through the arm of the duke.

"You do not reply," pursued Charles; "the proverb is plain enough, that 'Silence gives consent.' Very good,

Monsieur de Bragelonne; I am now in a position to satisfy you; whenever you please, therefore, you can leave for Paris, for which you have my authority."

"Sire!" exclaimed Raoul, while Mary stifled an exclamation of grief which rose to her lips, unconsciously pressing Buckingham's arm.

"You can be at Dover this evening," continued the king; "the tide serves at two o'clock in the morning."

Raoul, astounded, stammered out a few broken sentences, which equally answered the purpose both of thanks and of excuse.

"I, therefore, bid you adieu, Monsieur de Bragelonne, and wish you every sort of prosperity," said the king, rising; "you will confer a pleasure on me by keeping this diamond in remembrance of me; I had intended it as a marriage gift."

Miss Grafton felt her limbs almost giving way; and, as Raoul received the diamond from the king's hand, he, too, felt his strength and courage failing him. He addressed a few respectful words to the king, a passing compliment to Miss Stewart, and looked for Buckingham to bid him adieu. The king profited by this moment to disappear. Raoul found the duke engaged in endeavoring to encourage Miss Grafton.

"Tell him to remain, I implore you!" said Buckingham to Mary.

"No, I will tell him to go," replied Miss Grafton, with returning animation; "I am not one of those women who have more pride than heart; if she whom he loves is in France, let him return there and bless me for having advised him to go and seek his happiness there. If, on the contrary, she shall have ceased to love him, let him come back here again; I shall still love him, and his unhappiness will not have lessened him in my regard. In the arms of my house you will find that which heaven has engraven on my heart—*Habenti parum, egenti cuncta.* 'To the rich is accorded little, to the poor everything.' "

"I do not believe, Bragelonne, that you will find yonder the equivalent of what you leave behind you here."

"I think, or at least I hope," said Raoul, with a gloomy air, "that she whom I love is worthy of my affection; but if it be true she is unworthy of me, as you have endeavored to make me believe, I will tear her image from my heart, duke, even were my heart broken in the attempt."

Mary Grafton gazed upon him with an expression of the

most indefinable pity, and Raoul returned her look with a sad, sorrowful smile, saying:

"Mademoiselle, the diamond which the king has given me was destined for you—give me leave to offer it for your acceptance; if I marry in France, you will send it me back; if I do not marry, keep it."

And he bowed and left her.

"What does he mean?" thought Buckingham, while Raoul pressed Mary's icy hand with marks of the most reverential respect.

Mary understood the look that Buckingham fixed upon her.

"If it were a wedding-ring, I would not accept it," she said.

"And yet you were willing to ask him to return to you."

"Oh! duke," cried the young girl, in heart-broken accents, "a woman such as I am is never accepted as a consolation by a man like him."

"You do not think he will return, then?"

"Never," said Miss Grafton, in a choking voice.

"And I grieve to tell you, Mary, that he will find yonder his happiness destroyed, his mistress lost to him. His honor even has not escaped. What will be left him, then, Mary, equal to your affection? Do you answer, Mary, you who know yourself so well?"

Miss Grafton placed her white hand on Buckingham's arm, and, while Raoul was hurrying away with headlong speed, she sang, in dying accents, the line from "Romeo and Juliet," "I must be gone and live, or stay and die."

As she finished the last word, Raoul had disappeared. Miss Grafton returned to her own apartments, paler even than death itself. Buckingham availed himself of the arrival of the courier, who had brought the letter to the king, to write to madame and to the Comte de Guiche. The king had not been mistaken, for at two in the morning the tide was at full flood, and Raoul had embarked for France.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

ST. AIGNAN FOLLOWS MALICORNE'S ADVICE.

THE king most assiduously followed the progress which was made in La Valliere's portrait; and did so with a care and attention arising as much from a desire that it should

resemble her as from the wish that the painter should prolong the period of its completion as much as possible. It was amusing to observe him follow the artist's brush, awaiting the completion of a particular plan, or the result of a combination of colors, and suggesting various modifications to the painter, which the latter consented to adopt with the most respectful docility of disposition. And again, when the artist, following Malicorne's advice, was a little late in arriving, and when St. Aignan had been obliged to be absent for some time, it was interesting to observe, though no one witnessed them, those moments of silence full of deep expression, which united in one sigh two souls most disposed to understand each other, and who by no means objected to the quiet and meditation they enjoyed together. The minutes fled rapidly by, as if on wings, and as the king drew closer to Louise and bent his burning gaze upon her, a noise was suddenly heard in the anteroom. It was the artist, who had just arrived; St. Aignan, too, had returned, full of apologies; and the king began to talk, and La Valliere to answer him very hurriedly, their eyes revealing to St. Aignan that they had enjoyed a century of happiness during his absence. In a word, Malicorne, philosopher that he was, though he knew it not, had learned how to inspire the king with an appetite in the midst of plenty, and with desire in the assurance of possession. La Valliere's fears of interruption had never been realized, and no one imagined she was absent from her apartment two or three hours every day; she pretended that her health was very uncertain; those who went to her room always knocked before entering, and Malicorne, the man of so many ingenious inventions, had constructed an acoustic piece of mechanism, by means of which La Valliere, when in St. Aignan's apartment, was always forewarned of any visits which were paid to the room she usually inhabited. In this manner, therefore, without leaving her own room, and having no confidante, she was able to return to her apartment, thus removing by her appearance, a little tardy, perhaps, the suspicions of the most determined skeptics. Malicorne having asked St. Aignan the next morning what news he had to report, the latter had been obliged to confess that the quarter of an hour's liberty had made the king in most excellent humor.

"We must double the dose," replied Malicorne, "but insensibly so; wait until they seem to wish it."

They were so desirous for it, however, that on the even-

ing of the fourth day, at the moment when the painter was packing up his painting implements, during St. Aignan's continued absence, St. Aignan on his return noticed upon La Valliere's face a shade of disappointment and vexation which she could not conceal. The king was less reserved, and exhibited his annoyance by a very significant shrug of the shoulders, at which La Valliere could not help blushing.

"Very good!" thought St. Aignan to himself; "Monsieur Malicorne will be delighted this evening;" as he, in fact, was, when it was reported to him.

"It is very evident," he remarked to the comte, "that Mademoiselle de la Valliere hoped that you would be, at least, ten minutes later."

"And the king that I should be half an hour later, dear Monsieur Malicorne."

"You will be but very indifferently devoted to the king," replied the latter, "if you were to refuse his majesty that half-hour's satisfaction."

"But the painter," objected St. Aignan.

"I will take care of him," said Malicorne, "only I must study faces and circumstances a little before I act; those are my magical inventions and contrivances; and while sorcerers are enabled, by means of their astrolabe, to take the altitude of the sun, moon, and stars, I am satisfied merely by looking into people's faces, in order to see if their eyes are encircled with dark lines, and if the mouth describes a convex or a concave arc."

And the cunning Malicorne had every opportunity of watching narrowly and closely, for the very same evening the king accompanied the queen to madame's apartments, and made himself so remarked by his serious face and his deep sigh, and looked at La Valliere with such a languishing expression, that Malicorne said to Montalais during the evening:

"To-morrow."

And he went off to the painter's house in the street of the Jardins St. Paul to beg him to postpone the next sitting for a couple of days. St. Aignan was not within, when La Valliere, who was now quite familiar with the lower story, lifted up the trapdoor and descended. The king, as usual, was waiting for her on the staircase, and held a bouquet in his hand; as soon as he saw her, he clasped her tenderly in his arms. La Valliere, much moved at the action, looked around the room, but as she saw the

king was alone, she did not complain of it. They sat down, the king reclining near the cushions on which Louise was seated, with his head supported by her knees, placed there as an in asylum whence no one could banish him; he gazed ardently upon her, and as if the moment had arrived when nothing could interpose between their two hearts, she, too, gazed with similar passion upon him, and from her eyes, so soft and pure, there emanated a flame, whose rays first kindled and then inflamed the heart of the king, who, trembling with happiness as Louise's hand rested on his head, grew giddy from excess of joy, and momentarily awaited either the painter's or St. Aignan's return to break the sweet illusion. But the door remained closed, and neither St. Aignan nor the painter appeared, nor did the hangings even move. A deep, mysterious silence reigned in the room —a silence which seemed to influence even the birds in their gilded prison. The king, completely overcome, turned round his head and buried his burning lips in La Valliere's hands, who, herself, faint with excess of emotion, pressed her trembling hands against her lover's lips. Louis threw himself upon his knees, and as La Valliere did not move her head, the king's forehead being within reach of her lips, she furtively passed her lips across the perfumed locks which caressed her cheeks. The king seized her in his arms, and, unable to resist the temptation, they exchanged their first kiss—that burning kiss which changes love into a delirium. Suddenly a noise upon the upper floor was heard, which had, in fact, continued, though it had remained unnoticed for some time; it had at last aroused La Valliere's attention, though but slowly so. As the noise, however, continued, as it forced itself upon the attention, and recalled the poor girl from her dreams of happiness to the sad reality of life, she arose in a state of utter bewilderment, though beautiful in her disorder, saying:

"Some one is waiting, for above— Louis, Louis, do you not hear?"

"Well, and am I not waiting for you also?" said the king, with infinite tenderness of tone. "Let others henceforth wait for you."

But she gently shook her head, as she replied:

"Concealed happiness—concealed power—my pride should be silent as my heart."

The noise was again resumed.

"I hear Montalais' voice," she said, and she hurried up the staircase; the king followed her, unable to let her leave

his sight, and covering her hand with his kisses. "Yes, yes," repeated La Valliere, who had passed halfway through the opening. "Yes, it is Montalais who is calling me; something important must have happened."

"Go, then, dearest love," said the king, "but return quickly."

"No, no, not to-day, sire. Adieu, adieu!" she said, as she stooped down once more to embrace her lover, and then escaped.

Montalais was, in fact, waiting for her, very pale and agitated.

"Quick, quick! he is coming," she said.

"Who—who is coming?"

"Raoul," murmured Montalais.

"It is I—I," said a joyous voice, upon the last steps of the grand staircase.

La Valliere uttered a terrible shriek and threw herself back.

"I am here, dear Louise," said Raoul, running toward her. "I knew but too well that you had not ceased to love me."

La Valliere with a gesture, partly of extreme terror, and partly as if invoking a curse, attempted to speak, but could not articulate one word.

"No, no!" she said, as she fell into Montalais' arms, murmuring, "Do not touch me, do not come near me."

Montalais made a sign to Raoul, who stood almost petrified at the door, and did not even attempt to advance another step into the room. Then, looking toward the side of the room where the screen was, she exclaimed:

"Imprudent girl! she has not even closed the trapdoor!"

And she advanced toward the corner of the room to close the screen, and also, behind the screen, the trapdoor. But suddenly the king, who had heard Louise's exclamation, darted through the opening, and hurried forward to her assistance. He threw himself on his knees before her, as he overwhelmed Montalais with questions, who hardly knew where she was. At the moment, however, the king threw himself on his knees, a cry of utter despair rang through the corridor, accompanied by the sound of retreating footsteps. The king wished to see who had uttered the cry, and whose were the footsteps he had heard; and it was in vain that Montalais sought to retain him, for Louis, quitting his hold of La Valliere, hurried toward the door, too late, however, for Raoul was already at a distance, and the king saw only a kind of shadow turning the angle of the corridor.

CHAPTER XL.

TWO OLD FRIENDS.

WHILE every one at court was busily engaged upon his own affairs, a man mysteriously took up his post behind the Place de Grève, in the house which we once saw besieged by D'Artagnan on the occcasion of an *emeute*. The principal entrance of this house was in the Place Baudoyer; it was tolerably large, surrounded by gardens, inclosed in the Street St. Jean by the shops of tool-makers, which protected it from prying looks, and was walled in by a triple rampart of stone, noise, and verdure, like an embalmed mummy in its triple coffin. The man we have just alluded to walked along with a firm step, although he was no longer in his early prime. His dark cloak and long sword plainly revealed one who seemed in search of adventures; and, judging from his curling mustaches, his fine and smooth skin, which could be seen beneath his *sombrero*, it would not have been difficult to pronounce that the gallantry of his adventures was unquestionable. In fact, hardly had the cavalier entered the house, when the clock struck eight; and ten minutes afterward a lady, followed by a servant armed to the teeth, approached and knocked at the same door, which an old woman immediately opened for her. The lady raised her veil as she entered; though no longer beautiful or young, she was still active and of an imposing carriage. She concealed, beneath a rich toilet and the most exquisite taste, an age which Ninon de l'Enclos alone could have smiled at with impunity. Hardly had she reached the vestibule than the cavalier, whose features we have only roughly sketched, advanced toward her, holding out his hand.

"Good-day, my dear duchess," he said.

"How do you do, my dear Aramis?" replied the duchess.

He led her to a most elegantly furnished apartment, on whose high windows were reflected the expiring rays of the setting sun, which filtered through the dark crests of some adjoining firs. They sat down side by side. Neither of them thought of asking for additional light in the room, and they buried themselves, as it were, in the shadow, as if they wished to bury themselves in forgetfulness.

"Chevalier," said the duchess, "you have never given me a single sign of life since our interview at Fontainebleau, and I confess that your presence there on the day of the

Franciscan's death, and your initiation in certain secrets, caused me the liveliest astonishment I ever experienced in my whole life."

"I can explain my presence there to you, as well as my initiation," said Aramis.

"But let us, first of all," said the duchess, "talk a little of ourselves, for our friendship is by no means of recent date."

"Yes, madame; and if Heaven wills it, we shall continue to be friends, I will not say for a long time, but forever."

"That is quite certain, chevalier, and my visit is a proof of it."

"Our interests, duchess, are no longer the same as they used to be," said Aramis, smiling without apprehension in the gloom in which the room was cast, for it could not reveal that his smile was less agreeable and less bright than formerly.

"No, chevalier; at the present day we have other interests. Every period of life brings its own; and, as we now understand each other in conversing, as perfectly as we formerly did without saying a word, let us talk, if you like."

"I am at your orders, duchess. Ah! I beg your pardon, how did you obtain my address, and what was your object?"

"You ask me why? I have told you. Curiosity in the first place. I wished to know what you could have to do with the Franciscan, with whom I had certain business transactions, and who died so singularly. You know that on the occasion of our interview at Fontainebleau, in the cemetery, at the foot of the grave so recently closed, we were both so much overcome by our emotions that we omitted to confide to each other what we may have had to say."

"Yes, madame."

"Well, then, I had no sooner left you than I repented, and have ever since been most anxious to ascertain the truth. You know that Madame de Longueville and myself are almost one, I suppose?"

"I am not aware," said Aramis discreetly.

"I remembered, therefore," continued the duchess, "that neither of us said anything to the other in the cemetery; that you did not speak of the relationship in which you stood to the Franciscan, whose burial you had superintended, and that I did not refer to the position in which I stood to him; all which seemed very unworthy of two such old friends as ourselves, and I have sought an opportunity of an interview with you in order to give you some informa-

tion that I have recently acquired, and to assure you that Marie Michon, now no more, has left behind her one who has preserved her recollection of events."

Aramis bowed over the duchess' hand, and pressed his lips upon it.

"You must have had some trouble to find me again," he said.

"Yes," she answered, annoyed to find the subject taking a turn which Aramis wished to give it; "but I knew you were a friend of Monsieur Fouquet, and so I inquired in that direction."

"A friend—oh!" exclaimed the chevalier; "I can hardly pretend to be that. A poor priest who has been favored by so generous a protector, and whose heart is full of gratitude and devotion to him, is all that I pretend to be to Monsieur Fouquet."

"He made you a bishop?"

"Yes, duchess."

"A very good retiring pension for so handsome a musketeer."

"Yes; in the same way that political intrigue is for yourself," thought Aramis. "And so," he added, "you inquired after me at Monsieur Fouquet's."

"Easily enough. You had been to Fontainebleau with him, and had undertaken a voyage to your diocese, which is Belle-Isle-en-Mer, I believe."

"No, madame," said Aramis. "My diocese is Vannes."

"I meant that. I only thought that Belle-Isle-en-Mer——"

"Is a property belonging to Monsieur Fouquet, nothing more."

"Ah! I had been told that Belle-Isle was fortified; besides, I know how great the military knowledge is you possess."

"I have forgotten everything of the kind since I entered the Church," said Aramis, annoyed.

"Suffice it to know that I learned you had returned from Vannes, and I sent to one of our friends, Monsieur le Comte de la Fere, who is discretion itself, in order to ascertain it, but he answered that he was not aware of your address."

"So like Athos," thought the bishop; "that which is actually good never alters."

"Well, then, you know that I cannot venture to show myself here, and that the queen-mother has always some grievance or other against me."

"Yes, indeed, and I am surprised at it."

"Oh! there are various reasons for it. But, to continue, being obliged to conceal myself, I was fortunate enough to meet with Monsieur d'Artagnan, who was formerly one of your old friends, I believe?"

"A friend of mine still, duchess."

"He gave me some information, and sent me to Monsieur Baisemeaux, the governor of the Bastile."

Aramis was somewhat agitated at this remark, and a light flashed from his eyes in the darkness of the room, which he could not conceal from his keen-sighted friend.

"Monsieur de Baisemeaux!" he said; "why did D'Artagnan send you to Monsieur de Baisemeaux?"

"I cannot tell you."

"What can this possibly mean?" said the bishop, summoning all the resources of his mind to his aid, in order to carry on the combat in a befitting manner.

"Monsieur de Baisemeaux is greatly indebted to you, D'Artagnan told me."

"True, he is so."

"And the address of a creditor is as easily ascertained as that of a debtor."

"Very true; and so Baisemeaux indicated to you——"

"St. Mande, where I forwarded a letter to you."

"Which I have in my hand, and which is most precious to me," said Aramis, "because I am indebted to it for the pleasure of seeing you here."

The duchess, satisfied at having successfully alluded to the various difficulties of so delicate an explanation, began to breathe freely again, which Aramis, however, could not succeed in doing.

"We had got as far as your visit to Monsieur Baisemeaux, I believe?"

"Nay," she said, laughing, "further than that."

"In that case, we must have been speaking about the grudge you have against the queen-mother."

"Further still," she returned—"further still; we were talking of the connection——"

"Which existed between you and the Franciscan," said Aramis, interrupting her eagerly; "well, I am listening to you very attentively."

"It is easily explained," returned the duchess. "You know that I am living at Brussels with Monsieur de Laicques?"

"I have heard so."

"You know that my children have ruined and stripped me of everything."

"How terrible, dear duchess!"

"Terrible, indeed; this obliged me to resort to some means of obtaining a livelihood, and, particularly, to avoid vegetating the remainder of my existence away, I had old hatreds to turn to account, old friendships to serve; I no longer had either credit or protectors."

"You, too, who had extended protection toward so many persons," said Aramis softly.

"It is always the case, chevalier. Well, at the present time I am in the habit of seeing the King of Spain very frequently."

"Ah!"

"Who has just nominated a general of the Jesuits, according to the usual custom."

"Is it usual, indeed?"

"Were you not aware of it?"

"I beg your pardon; I was inattentive."

"You must be aware of that—you who were on such good terms with the Franciscan."

"With the general of the Jesuits, you mean?"

"Exactly. Well, then, I have seen the King of Spain, who wished to do me a service, but was unable. He gave me recommendations, however, to Flanders, both for myself and for Laicques, too; and conferred a pension on me out of the funds belonging to the order."

"Of Jesuits?"

"Yes. The general—I mean the Franciscan—was sent to me; and, for the purpose of conforming with the requisitions of the statutes of the order, and of entitling me to the pension, I was reputed to be in a position to render certain services. You are aware that that is the rule?"

"No, I did not know it," said Aramis.

Mme. de Chevreuse paused to look at Aramis, but it was perfectly dark.

"Well, such is the rule, however," she resumed. "I ought, therefore, to seem to possess a power of usefulness of some kind or other. I proposed to travel for the order, and I was placed on the lists of affiliated travelers. You understand it was a formality, by means of which I received my pension, which was very convenient for me."

"Good heavens! duchess, what you tell me is like a dagger thrust into me. *You* obliged to receive a pension from the Jesuits?"

"No, chevalier; from Spain."

"Except as a conscientious scruple, duchess, you will admit that it is pretty nearly the same thing."

"No, not at all."

"But, surely, of your magnificent fortune there must remain——"

"Dampierre is all that remains."

"And that is handsome enough."

"Yes; but Dampierre is burdened, mortgaged, and almost fallen to ruin, like its owner."

"And can the queen-mother know and see all that, without shedding a tear?" said Aramis, with a penetrating look, which encountered nothing but the darkness.

"Yes, she has forgotten everything."

"You have, I believe, attempted to get restored to favor?"

"Yes; but, most singularly, the young king inherits the antipathy that his dear father had for me. You will, too, tell me that I am indeed a woman to be hated, and that I am no longer one who can be loved."

"Dear duchess, pray arrive soon at the circumstance which brought you here; for I think we can be of service to each other."

"Such has been my own thought. I came to Fontainebleau with a double object in view. In the first place, I was summoned there by the Franciscan whom you knew. By the bye, how did you know him? for I have told you my story, and have not yet heard yours."

"I knew him in a very natural way, duchess. I studied theology with him at Parma. We became fast friends; and it happened, from time to time, that business, or travels, or war, separated us from each other."

"You were, of course, aware that he was the general of the Jesuits?"

"I suspected it."

"But by what extraordinary chance did it happen that you were at the hotel where the affiliated travelers had met together?"

"Oh!" said Aramis, in a calm voice, "it was the merest chance in the world. I was going to Fontainebleau to see Monsieur Fouquet, for the purpose of obtaining an audience of the king. I was passing by, unknown; I saw the poor dying monk in the road, and recognized him immediately. You know the rest—he died in my arms."

"Yes; but bequeathing to you so vast a power that you issue your sovereign orders and directions like a monarch."

"He certainly did leave me a few commissions to settle."

"And for me?"

"I have told you—a sum of twelve thousand livres was to be paid to you. I thought I had given you the necessary signature to enable you to receive it. Did you not get the money?"

"Oh! yes, yes. You give your orders, I am informed, with so much mystery, and such a majestic presence, that it is generally believed you are the successor of the defunct chief."

Aramis colored impatiently, and the duchess continued:

"I have obtained my information," she said, "from the King of Spain himself; and he cleared up some of my doubts on the point. Every general of the Jesuits is nominated by him, and must be a Spaniard, according to the statutes of the order. You are not a Spaniard, nor have you been nominated by the King of Spain."

Aramis did not reply to this remark, except to say:

"You see, duchess, how greatly you were mistaken, since the King of Spain told you that."

"Yes, my dear Aramis; but there was something else which I have been thinking of."

"What is that?"

"You know, I believe, something about most things; and it occurred to me that you know the Spanish language."

"Every Frenchman who has been actively engaged in the Fronde knows Spanish."

"You have lived in Flanders?"

"Three years."

"And have stayed at Madrid?"

"Fifteen months."

"You are in a position, then, to become a naturalized Spaniard, when you like."

"Really?" said Aramis, with a frankness which deceived the duchess.

"Undoubtedly. Two years' residence and an acquaintance with the language are indispensable. You have upward of four years—more than double the time necessary."

"What are you driving at, duchess?"

"At this—I am on good terms with the King of Spain."

"And I am not on bad terms," thought Aramis to himself.

"Shall I ask the king," continued the duchess, "to confer the succession to the Franciscan's post upon you?"

"Oh, duchess!"

"You have it already, perhaps?" she said.

"No, upon my honor."

"Very well, then I can render you that service."

"Why did you not render the same service to Monsieur de Laicques, duchess? He is a very talanted man, and one you love, besides."

"Yes, no doubt; but, at all events, putting Laicques aside, will you have it?"

"No, I thank you, duchess."

She paused.

"He is nominated," she thought; and then resumed, aloud:

"If you refuse me in this manner, it is not very encouraging for me, supposing I should have something to ask of you."

"Oh, ask—pray, ask!"

"Ask! I cannot do so, if you have not the power to grant what I want."

"However limited my power and ability, ask, all the same."

"I need a sum of money to restore Dampierre."

"Ah!" replied Aramis coldly, "money? Well, duchess, how much would you require?"

"Oh, a tolerably round sum."

"So much the worse; you know I am not rich."

"No, no; but the order is—and if you had been the general——"

"You know I am not the general, I think."

"In that case, you have a friend who must be very wealthy—Monsieur Fouquet."

"Monsieur Fouquet! He is more than half ruined, madame."

"So it is said, but I would not believe it."

"Why, duchess?"

"Because I have, or, rather, Laicques has, certain letters in his possession from Cardinal Mazarin, which establish the existence of very strange accounts."

"What accounts?"

"Relative to various sums of money borrowed and disposed of. I cannot very distinctly remember what they are; but they establish the fact that the surintendant, according to these letters, which are signed by Mazarin, had taken thirty millions of francs from the coffers of the state. The case is a very serious one."

Aramis clinched his hands in anxiety and apprehension.

"Is it possible," he said, "that you have such letters as you speak of, and have not communicated them to Monsieur Fouquet?"

"Ah!" replied the duchess, "I keep such little matters as these in reserve. The day may come when they may be of service; and they can then be withdrawn from the safe custody in which they now are."

"And that day has arrived?" said Aramis.

"Yes."

"And you are going to show those letters to Monsieur Fouquet?"

"I prefer to talk about them with you, instead."

"You must be in sad want of money, my poor friend, to think of such things as these—you, too, who held Monsieur de Mazarin's prose effusions in such indifferent esteem."

"The fact is, I am in want of money."

"And then," continued Aramis, in cold accents, "it must have been very distressing to you to be obliged to have recourse to such a means. It is cruel."

"Oh! if I had wished to do harm instead of good," said Mme. de Chevreuse, "instead of asking the general of the order or Monsieur Fouquet for the five hundred thousand francs I require, I——"

"Five hundred thousand francs!"

"Yes; no more. Do you think it much? I require, at least, as much as that to restore Dampierre."

"Yes, madame."

"I say, therefore, that instead of asking for this amount, I should have gone to see my old friend the queen-mother, the letters from her husband, Signor Mazarini, would have served me as an introduction, and I should have begged this mere trifle of her, saying to her, 'I wish, madame, to have the honor of receiving you at Dampierre. Permit me to put Dampierre in a fit state for that purpose.'"

Aramis did not reply a single word.

"Well," she said, "what are you thinking about?"

"I am making certain additions," said Aramis.

"And Monsieur Fouquet subtractions. I, on the other hand, am trying the art of multiplication. What excellent calculators we are! How well we could understand one another!"

"Will you allow me to reflect?" said Aramis.

"No, for with such an opening between people like ourselves, 'yes' or 'no' is the only answer, and that an immediate one."

"It is a snare," thought the bishop; "it is impossible that Anne of Austria could listen to such a woman as this."

"Well?" said the duchess.

"Well, madame, I should be very much astonished if Monsieur Fouquet had five hundred thousand francs at his disposal at the present moment."

"It is no use speaking of it, then," said the duchess, "and Dampierre must get restored how it can."

"Oh! you are not embarrassed to such an extent as that, I suppose?"

"No; I am never embarrassed."

"And the queen," continued the bishop, "will certainly do for you what the surintendant is unable to do."

"Oh, certainly. But tell me, do you not think it would be better that I should speak, myself, to Monsieur Fouquet about these letters?"

"Nay, duchess, you will do precisely whatever you please in that respect. Monsieur Fouquet either feels or does not feel himself to be guilty; if he really be so, I know he is proud enough not to confess it; if he be not so, he will be exceedingly offended at your menace."

"As usual, you reason like an angel," said the duchess, as she rose from her seat.

"And so you are now going to denounce Monsieur Fouquet to the queen?" said Aramis.

"'Denounce!' Oh, what a disagreeable word! I shall not 'denounce' my dear friend; you now know matters of policy too well to be ignorant how easily these affairs are arranged. I shall merely side against Monsieur Fouquet, and nothing more; and, in a war of party against party, a weapon of attack is always a weapon."

"No doubt."

"And once on friendly terms again with the queen-mother, I may be dangerous toward some persons."

"You are at perfect liberty to be so, duchess."

"A liberty of which I shall avail myself."

"You are not ignorant, I suppose, duchess, that Monsieur Fouquet is on the best terms with the King of Spain."

"I suppose so."

"If, therefore, you begin a party warfare against Monsieur Fouquet, he will reply in the same way; for he, too, is at perfect liberty to do so, is he not?"

"Oh, certainly."

"And as he is on good terms with Spain, he will make use of that friendship as a weapon of attack."

"You mean that he will be on good terms with the general of the order of the Jesuits, my dear Aramis."

"That may be the case, duchess."

"And that, consequently, the pension I have been receiving from the order will be stopped."

"I am greatly afraid it might be."

"Well, I must contrive to console myself in the best way I can; for after Richelieu, after the Frondes, after exile, what is there left for Madame de Chevreuse to be afraid of?"

"The pension, you are aware, is forty-eight thousand francs."

"Alas! I am quite aware of it."

"Moreover, in party contests, you know, the friends of the enemy do not escape."

"Ah! you mean that poor Laicques will have to suffer?"

"I am afraid it is almost inevitable, duchess."

"Oh! he only receives twelve thousand francs pension."

"Yes, but the King of Spain has some influence left; advised by Monsieur Fouquet, he might get Monsieur Laicques shut up in prison for a little while."

"I am not very nervous on that point, my dear friend, because, thanks to a reconciliation with Anne of Austria, I will undertake that France should insist upon Monsieur Laicques' liberation."

"True. In that case, you will have something else to apprehend."

"What can that be?" said the duchess, pretending to be surprised and terrified.

"You will learn; indeed, you must know it already, that, having once been an affiliated member of the order, it is not easy to leave it; for the secrets that any particular member may have acquired are unwholesome, and carry with them the germs of misfortune for whoever may reveal them."

The duchess paused and reflected for a moment, and then said:

"That is more serious; I will think over it."

And, notwithstanding the profound obscurity, Aramis seemed to feel a burning glance, like a hot iron, escape from his friend's eyes, and plunge into his heart.

"Let us recapitulate," said Aramis, determined to keep himself on his guard, and gliding his hand into his breast, where he had a dagger concealed.

"Exactly, let us recapitulate; good accounts make good friends."

"The suppression of your pension——"

"Forty-eight thousand francs, and that of Laicques' twelve, make together sixty thousand francs; that is what you mean, I suppose?"

"Precisely; and I was trying to find out what would be your equivalent for that."

"Five hundred thousand francs, which I shall get from the queen."

"Or which you will not get."

"I know a means of procuring them," said the duchess thoughtlessly.

This remark made the chevalier prick up his ears; and from the moment his adversary had committed this error, his mind was so thoroughly on its guard that he seemed every moment to gain the advantage more and more, and she, consequently, to lose it.

"I will admit, for argument's sake, that you obtain the money," he resumed; "you will lose the double of it, having a hundred thousand francs pension to receive instead of sixty thousand, and that for a period of ten years."

"Not so, for I shall only be subjected to this reduction of my income during the period of Monsieur Fouquet's remaining in power, a period which I estimate at two months."

"Ah!" said Aramis.

"I am frank, you see."

"I thank you for it, duchess; but you would be wrong to suppose that after Monsieur Fouquet's disgrace the order would resume the payment of your pension."

"I know a means of making the order pay, as I know a means of forcing the queen-mother to concede what I require."

"In that case, duchess, we are all obliged to strike our flags to you. The victory is yours, and the triumph also is yours. Be clement, I entreat you."

"But is it possible," resumed the duchess, without taking notice of the irony, "that you really draw back from a miserable sum of five hundred thousand francs, when it is a question of sparing you—I mean your friend—I beg your pardon, I ought rather to say your protector—the disagreeable consequences which a party contest produces?"

"Duchess, I will tell you why. Supposing the five hundred thousand francs were to be given you, Monsieur Laicques will require his share, which will be another five hundred thousand francs, I presume? and then, after Monsieur de Laicques' and your own portions have been arranged,

the portions which your children, your poor pensioners, and various other persons will require, will start up as fresh claims, and these letters, however compromising they may be in their nature, are not worth from three to four millions. Can you have forgotten the Queen of France's diamonds?—they were surely worth more than these bits of waste paper signed by Mazarin, and yet their recovery did not cost a quarter of what you ask for yourself."

"Yes, that is true; but the merchant values his goods at his own price, and it is for the purchaser to buy or refuse."

"Stay a moment, duchess; would you like me to tell you why I will not buy your letters?"

"Pray tell me."

"Because the letters you say are Mazarin's are false."

"What an absurdity!"

"I have no doubt of it, for it would, to say the least, be very singular, that after you had quarreled with the queen through Monsieur Mazarin's means, you should have kept up any intimate acquaintance with the latter; it would look as if you had been acting as a spy; and upon my word, I do not like to make use of the word."

"Oh! pray, say it."

"Your great complacence would seem very suspicious, at all events."

"That is quite true; but what is not less so, is that which the letter contains."

"I pledge you my word, duchess, that you will not be able to make use of it with the queen."

"Oh, yes, indeed, I can make use of everything with the queen."

"Very good," thought Aramis. "Croak on, old owl—hiss, viper that you are!"

But the duchess had said enough, and advanced a few steps toward the door. Aramis, however, had reserved an exposure which she did not expect—the imprecation of the slave behind the car of the conqueror. He rang the bell, candles immediately appeared in the adjoining room, and the bishop found himself completely encircled by lights, which shone upon the worn, haggard face of the duchess, revealing every feature but too clearly. Aramis fixed a long and ironical look upon her pale, thin, withered cheeks—upon her dim, dull eyes—and upon her lips, which she kept carefully closed over her blackened and scanty teeth. He, however, had thrown himself into a graceful attitude, with his haughty and intelligent head thrown back; he smiled so as

to reveal his teeth, which were still brilliant and dazzling. The old coquette understood the trick that had been played her. She was standing immediately before a large mirror, in which her decrepitude, so carefully concealed, was only made more manifest. And, thereupon, without even saluting Aramis, who bowed with the ease and grace of the musketeer of early days, she hurried away with trembling steps, which her very precipitation only the more impeded. Aramis sprung across the room, like a zephyr, to lead her to the door. Mme. de Chevreuse made a sign to her servant, who resumed his musket; and she left the house where such tender friends had not been able to understand each other, only because they had understood each other too well.

CHAPTER XLI.

WHEREIN MAY BE SEEN THAT A BARGAIN WHICH CANNOT BE MADE WITH ONE PERSON CAN BE CARRIED OUT WITH ANOTHER.

Aramis had been perfectly correct in his supposition; for hardly had she left the house in the Place Baudoyer than Mme. de Chevreuse proceeded homeward. She was, doubtless, afraid of being followed, and by this means thought she might succeed in throwing those who might be following her off their guard; but scarcely had she arrived within the door of the hotel, and hardly had assured herself that no one who could cause her any uneasiness was on her track, when she opened the door of the garden leading into another street, and hurried toward the Rue Croix des Petits Champs, where M. Colbert resided.

We have already said that evening, or, rather, night, had closed in; it was a dark, thick night, besides; Paris had once more sunk into its calm, quiescent state, enshrouding alike within its indulgent mantle the high-born duchess carrying out her political intrigue, and the simple citizen's wife, who, having been detained late by a supper in the city, was making her way slowly homeward, hanging on the arm of a lover, by the shortest possible route. Mme. de Chevreuse had been too well accustomed to nocturnal political intrigues to be ignorant that a minister never denies himself, even at his own private residence, to any young and beautiful woman who may chance to object to the dust

and confusion of a public office, or to old women, as full of experience as of years, who dislike the indiscreet echo of official residences. A valet received the duchess under the peristyle, and received her, it must be admitted, with some indifference of manner; he intimated, after having looked at her face, that it was hardly at such an hour that one so advanced in years as herself could be permitted to disturb M. Colbert's important occupations. But Mme. de Chevreuse, without looking or appearing to be annoyed, wrote her name upon a leaf of her tablets—a name which had but too frequently sounded so disagreeably in the ears of Louis XIII. and of the great cardinal. She wrote her name in the large, ill-formed characters of the higher classes of that period, folded the paper in a manner peculiarly her own, handed it to the valet, without uttering a word, but with so haughty and imperious a gesture, that the fellow, well accustomed to judge of people from their manners and appearance, perceived at once the quality of the person before him, bowed his head, and ran to M. Colbert's room. The minister could not control a sudden exclamation as he opened the paper; and the valet, gathering from it the interest with which his master regarded the mysterious visitor, returned as fast as he could to beg the duchess to follow him. She ascended to the first floor of the beautiful new house very slowly, rested herself on the landing-place, in order not to enter the apartment out of breath, and appeared before M. Colbert, who, with his own hands, held both the folding-doors open. The duchess paused at the threshold, for the purpose of well studying the character of the man with whom she was about to converse. At the first glance, the round, large, heavy head, thick brows, and ill-favored features of Colbert, who wore, thrust low down on his head, a cap like a priest's *calotte*, seemed to indicate that but little difficulty was likely to be met with in her negotiations with him, but also that she was to expect as little interest in the discussion of particulars; for there was scarcely any indication that the rough and uncouth nature of the man was susceptible to the impulses of a refined revenge or of an exalted ambition. But, when, on closer inspection, the duchess perceived the small, piercingly black eyes, the longitudinal wrinkles of his high and massive forehead, the imperceptible twitching of the lips, on which were apparent traces of rough good-humor, Mme. de Chevreuse altered her opinion of him, and felt she could say to herself, "I have found the man I want."

"What is the subject, madame, which procures me the honor of a visit from you?" he inquired.

"The need I have of you, monsieur," returned the duchess, "as well as that which you have of me."

"I am delighted, madame, with the first portion of your sentence; but as far as the second portion is concerned——"

Mme. de Chevreuse sat down in the armchair which M. Colbert advanced toward her.

"Monsieur Colbert, you are the intendant of finances, and are ambitious of becoming the surintendant?"

"Madame!"

"Nay, do not deny it; that would only unnecessarily prolong our conversation, and that is useless."

"And yet, madame, however well disposed and inclined to show politeness I may be toward a lady of your position and merit, nothing will make me confess that I have ever entertained the idea of supplanting my superior."

"I said nothing about supplanting, Monsieur Colbert. Could I accidentally have made use of that word? I hardly think that likely. The word 'replace' is less aggressive in its signification, and more grammatically suitable, as Monsieur de Voiture would say. I presume, therefore, that you are ambitious of replacing Monsieur Fouquet."

"Monsieur Fouquet's fortune, madame, enables him to withstand all attempts. The surintendant in this age plays the part of the Colossus of Rhodes; the vessels pass beneath him and do not overthrow him."

"I ought to have availed myself precisely of that very comparison. It is true, Monsieur Fouquet plays the part of the Colossus of Rhodes; but I remember to have heard it said by Monsieur Conrart, a member of the Academy, I believe, that when the Colossus of Rhodes fell from its lofty position, the merchant who had cast it down—a merchant, nothing more, Monsieur Colbert—loaded four hundred camels with the ruins. A merchant! and that is considerably less than an intendant of finances."

"Madame, I can assure you that I shall never overthrow Monsieur Fouquet."

"Very good, Monsieur Colbert, since you persist in showing so much sensitiveness with me, as if you were ignorant that I am Madame de Chevreuse, and also that I am somewhat advanced in years; in other words, that you have to do with a woman who has had political dealings with the Cardinal de Richelieu, and who has no time to lose; as, I repeat, you do not hesitate to commit such an imprudence, I

shall go and find others who are more intelligent and more desirous of making their fortunes."

"How, madame, how?"

"You give me a very poor idea of negotiators of the present day. I assure you that if, in my earlier days, a woman had gone to Monsieur de Cinq-Mars, who was not, moreover, a man of a very high order of intellect, and had said to him about the cardinal what I have just said to you of Monsieur Fouquet, Monsieur de Cinq-Mars would by this time have already set actively to work."

"Nay, madame, show a little indulgence, I entreat you."

"Well, then, do you really consent to replace Monsieur Fouquet?"

"Certainly, I do, if the king dismisses Monsieur Fouquet."

"Again, a word too much; it is quite evident that if you have not yet succeeded in driving Monsieur Fouquet from his post, it is because you have not been able to do so. Therefore, I should be the greatest simpleton possible if, in coming to you, I did not bring the very thing you require."

"I am distressed to be obliged to persist, madame," said Colbert, after a silence which enabled the duchess to sound the depth of his dissimulation, "but I must warn you that, for the last six years, denunciation after denunciation has been made against Monsieur Fouquet, and he has remained unshaken and unaffected by them."

"There is a time for everything, Monsieur Colbert; those who were the authors of those denunciations were not called Madame de Chevreuse, and they had no proofs equal to the six letters from Monsieur de Mazarin which establish the offense in question."

"The offense!"

"The crime, if you like it better."

"The crime! committed by Monsieur Fouquet?"

"Nothing less. It is rather strange, Monsieur Colbert, but your face, which just now was cold and indifferent, is now positively the very reverse."

"A crime!"

"I am delighted to see it makes an impression upon you."

"It is because that word, madame, embraces so many things."

"It embraces the post of surintendant of finance for yourself, and a letter of exile, or the Bastile, for Monsieur Fouquet."

"Forgive me, Madame la Duchesse, but it is almost impossible that Monsieur Fouquet can be exiled; to be imprisoned or disgraced, that is already a great deal."

"Oh, I am perfectly aware of what I am saying," returned Mme. de Chevreuse coldly. "I do not live at such a distance from Paris as not to know what takes place there. The king does not like Monsieur Fouquet, and he would willingly sacrifice Monsieur Fouquet if an opportunity were only given him."

"It must be a good one though."

"Good enough, and one I estimate to be worth five hundred thousand francs."

"In what way?" said Colbert.

"I mean, monsieur, that holding this opportunity in my own hands, I will not allow it to be transferred to yours, except for a sum of five hundred thousand francs."

"I understand you perfectly, madame. But since you have fixed a price for the sale, let me now see the value of the articles to be sold."

"Oh, a mere trifle; six letters, as I have already told you, from Monsieur de Mazarin; and the autographs will most assuredly not be regarded as too highly priced, if they establish, in an irrefutable manner, that Monsieur Fouquet has embezzled large sums of money from the treasury and appropriated them to his own purposes."

"In an irrefutable manner, do you say?" observed Colbert, whose eyes sparkled with delight.

"Perfectly so. Would you like to read the letters?"

"With all my heart! Copies, of course?"

"Of course, the copies," said the duchess, as she drew from her bosom a small packet of papers flattened by her velvet bodice. "Read," she said.

Colbert eagerly snatched the papers and devoured them.

"Excellent!" he said.

"It is clear enough, is it not?"

"Yes, madame, yes; Monsieur Mazarin must have handed the money to Monsieur Fouquet, who must have kept it for his own purposes; but the question is, what money?"

"Exactly—what money? If we come to terms, I will join to these six letters a seventh, which will supply you with the fullest particulars."

Colbert reflected.

"And the originals of those letters?"

"A useless question to ask; exactly as if I were to ask you, Monsieur Colbert, whether the money-bags you will give me will be full or empty."

"Very good, madame."

"Is it concluded?"

"No; for there is one circumstance to which neither of us has given any attention."

"Name it."

"Monsieur Fouquet can be utterly ruined, under the circumstances you have detailed, only by means of legal proceedings."

"Well?"

"A public scandal, for instance; and yet neither the legal proceedings nor the scandal can be commenced against him."

"Why not?"

"Because he is procureur-général of the parliament; because, too, in France, all public administrations, the army, justice itself, and commerce, are intimately connected by ties of good-fellowship, which people call *esprit de corps*. In such a case, madame, the parliament will never permit its chief to be dragged before a public tribunal; and never, even if he be dragged there by royal authority, never, I say, will he be condemned."

"Well, Monsieur Colbert, I do not see what I have to do with that."

"I am aware of that, madame; but I have to do with it, and it, consequently, diminishes the value of what you have brought to show me. What good can a proof of crime be to me without the possibility of obtaining a condemnation?"

"Even if he be only suspected, Monsieur Fouquet will lose his post of surintendant."

"Is that all?" exclaimed Colbert, whose dark, gloomy features were momentarily lighted up by an expression of hate and vengeance.

"Ah! ah! Monsieur Colbert," said the duchess, "forgive me; but I did not think you were so impressionable. Very good; in that case, since you need more than I have to give you, there is no occasion to speak of the matter at all."

"Yes, madame, we will go on talking of it; only, as the value of your commodities has decreased, you must lower your pretensions."

"You are bargaining, then?"

"Every man who wishes to deal loyally is obliged to do so."

"How much will you offer me?"

"Two hundred thousand francs," said Colbert.

The duchess laughed in his face, and then said, suddenly:

"Wait a moment; I have another arrangement to propose. Will you give me three hundred thousand francs?"

"No, no."

"Oh, you can either accept or refuse my terms; besides, that is not all."

"More still; you are becoming too impracticable to deal with, madame."

"Less so than you think, perhaps; for it is not money I am going to ask you for."

"What is it, then?"

"A service; you know that I have always been most affectionately attached to the queen, and I am desirous of having an interview with her majesty."

"With the queen?"

"Yes, Monsieur Colbert, with the queen, who is, I admit, no longer my friend, and who has ceased to be so for a long time past, but who may again become so if the opportunity be only given her."

"Her majesty has ceased to receive any one, madame. She is a great sufferer, and you may be aware that the paroxysms of her disease occur with greater frequency than ever."

"That is the very reason why I wish to have an interview with her majesty; for in Flanders there is a great variety of these kinds of complaints."

"What, cancers—a fearful, incurable disorder?"

"Do not believe that, Monsieur Colbert. The Flemish peasant is somewhat a man of nature, and his companion for life is not alone a wife, but a female laborer also; for while he is smoking his pipe, the woman works; it is she who draws the water from the well; she who loads the mule or the ass, and even bears herself a portion of the burden. Taking but little care of herself, she gets knocked about first in one direction, and then in another, and very often is beaten by her husband, and cancers frequently arise from contusions."

"True, true," said Colbert.

"The Flemish women do not die the sooner on that account. When they are great sufferers from this disease they go in search of remedies, and the Béguines of Bruges are excellent doctors for every kind of disease. They have precious waters of one sort or another, specifics of various kinds, and they give a bottle of it and a wax candle to the sufferer, whereby the priests are gainers, and heaven is served by the disposal of both their wares. I will take the queen some of this holy water, which I will procure from the Béguines of Bruges; her majesty will recover, and will

burn as many wax candles as she may see fit. You see, Monsieur Colbert, to prevent my seeing the queen is almost as bad as committing the crime of regicide."

"You are, undoubtedly, Madame la Duchesse, a woman of exceedingly great abilities, and I am more than astounded at their display; still I cannot but suppose that this charitable consideration toward the queen in some measure covers a slight personal interest for yourself."

"I have not given myself the trouble to conceal it, that I am aware of, Monsieur Colbert. You said, I believe, that I had a slight personal interest? On the contrary, it is a very great interest, and I will prove it to you by resuming what I was saying. If you procure me a personal interview with her majesty, I will be satisfied with the three hundred thousand francs I have claimed; if not, I shall keep my letters, unless, indeed, you give me, on the spot, five hundred thousand francs for them."

And rising from her seat with this decisive remark, the old duchess plunged M. Colbert into a disagreeable perplexity. To bargain any further was out of the question; and not to bargain was to pay a great deal too dearly for them.

"Madame," he said, "I shall have the pleasure of handing you over a hundred thousand crowns; but how shall I get the actual letters themselves?"

"In the simplest manner in the world, my dear Monsieur Colbert—whom will you trust?"

The financier began to laugh silently, so that his large eyebrows went up and down, like the wings of a bat, upon the deep lines of his yellow forehead.

"No one," he said.

"You surely will make an exception in your own favor, Monsieur Colbert?"

"In what way, madame?"

"I mean, that if you would take the trouble to accompany me to the place where the letters are, they would be delivered into your own hands, and you would be able to verify and check them."

"Quite true."

"You would bring the hundred thousand crowns with you at the same time, for I, too, do not trust any one?"

Colbert colored to the tips of his ears. Like all eminent men in the art of figures, he was of an insolent and mathematical probity.

"I will take with me, madame," he said, "two orders for

the amount agreed upon, payable at my treasury. Will that satisfy you?"

"Would that the orders on your treasury were for two millions, Monsieur l'Intendant! I shall have the pleasure of showing you the way, then?"

"Allow me to order my carriage."

"I have a carriage below, monsieur."

Colbert coughed like an irresolute man. He imagined for a moment that the proposition of the duchess was a snare, that perhaps some one was waiting at the door, and that she whose secret had just been sold to Colbert for a hundred thousand crowns had already offered it to Fouquet for the same sum. As he still hesitated a good deal, the duchess looked at him full in the face.

"You prefer your own carriage?" she said.

"I admit that I do."

"You suppose that I am going to lead you into a snare or trap of some sort or other?"

"Madame la Duchesse, you have the character of being somewhat inconsiderate at times, and, as I am clothed in a sober, solemn character, a jest or practical joke might compromise me."

"Yes; the fact is, you are afraid. Well, then, take your own carriage, as many servants as you like, only think well of what I am going to say. What we two may arrange between us, we are the only persons who know it; if a third had witnessed, we might as well have told the whole world of it. After all, I do not make a point of it; my carriage shall follow yours, and I shall be satisfied to accompany you in your own carriage to the queen."

"To the queen!"

"Have you forgotten that already? Is it possible that one of the clauses of the agreement of so much importance to me can have escaped you already? How trifling it seems to you, indeed; if I had known it, I should have asked double what I have done."

"I have reflected, madame, and I shall not accompany you."

"Really—and why not?"

"Because I have the most perfect confidence in you."

"You overpower me. But, provided I receive the hundred thousand crowns?"

"Here they are, madame," said Colbert, scribbling a few lines on a piece of paper, which he handed to the duchess, adding, "You are paid."

"The trait is a fine one, Monsieur Colbert, and I will reward you for it," she said, beginning to laugh.

Mme. de Chevreuse's laugh was a very sinister sound; every man who feels youth, faith, love, life itself, throbbing in his heart would prefer tears to such a lamentable laugh. The duchess opened the front of her dress and drew forth from her bosom, somewhat less white than it once had been, a small packet of papers, tied with a flame-colored ribbon, and, still laughing, she said:

"There, Monsieur Colbert, are the originals of Cardinal Mazarin's letters; they are now your own property," she added, refastening the body of her dress; "your fortune is secured, and now accompany me to the queen."

"No, madame; if you are again about to run the chance of her majesty's displeasure, and it were known at the Palais Royal that I had been the means of introducing you there, the queen would never forgive me while she lived. No; there are certain persons at the palace who are devoted to me, who will procure you an admission without my being compromised."

"Just as you please, provided I enter."

"What do you term those religious women at Bruges who cure disorders?"

"Béguines."

"Good; are you one?"

"As you please; but I must soon cease to be one."

"That is your affair."

"Excuse me, but I do not wish to be exposed to a refusal."

"That is again your own affair, madame. I am going to give directions to the head valet of the gentlemen-in-waiting of her majesty to allow admission to a Béguine who brings an effectual remedy for her majesty's sufferings. You are the bearer of my letter, you will undertake to be provided with the remedy, and will give every explanation on the subject. I admit a knowledge of a Béguine, but I deny all knowledge of Madame de Chevreuse. Here, madame, then, is your letter of introduction."

CHAPTER XLII.

THE SKIN OF THE BEAR.

Colbert handed the duchess the letter, and gently drew aside the chair behind which she was standing; Mme. de

Chevreuse, with a very slight bow, immediately left the room. Colbert, who had recognized Mazarin's handwriting, and had counted the letters, rang to summon his secretary, whom he enjoined to go in immediate search of M. Vanel, a counselor of the parliament. The secretary replied that, according to his usual practice, M. Vanel had just that moment entered the house, in order to render to the intendant an account of the principal details of the business which had been transacted during the day in the sitting of the parliament. Colbert approached one of the lamps, read the letters of the deceased cardinal over again, smiled repeatedly as he recognized the great value of the papers Mme. de Chevreuse had just delivered to him, and burying his head in his hands for a few minutes, reflected profoundly. In the meantime, a tall, large-made man entered the room; his spare, thin face, steady look, and hooked nose, as he entered Colbert's cabinet, with a modest assurance of manner, revealed a character at once supple and decided—supple toward the master who could throw him the prey, firm toward the dogs who might possibly be disposed to dispute it with him. M. Vanel carried a voluminous bundle of papers under his arm, and placed it on the desk on which Colbert was leaning both his elbows, as he supported his head.

"Good-day, Monsieur Vanel," said the latter, rousing himself from his meditation.

"Good-day, monseigneur," said Vanel naturally.

"You should say monsieur, and not monseigneur," replied Colbert gently.

"We give the title of monseigneur to ministers," returned Vanel, with extreme self-possession, "and you are a minister."

"Not yet."

"You are so in point of fact, and I call you monseigneur accordingly; besides, you are my seigneur for me, and that is sufficient; if you dislike my calling you monseigneur before others, allow me, at least, to call you so in private."

Colbert raised his head as if to read, or try to read, upon Vanel's face how much actual sincerity entered into this protestation of devotion. But the counselor knew perfectly well how to sustain the weight of his look, even were it armed with the full authority of the title he had conferred. Colbert sighed; he could not read anything in Vanel's face, and Vanel might possibly be honest in his professions, but Colbert recollected that this man, inferior to himself in

every other respect, was actually his superior through the fact of his having a wife unfaithful to him. At the moment he was pitying this man's lot, Vanel coldly drew from his pocket a perfumed letter, sealed with Spanish wax, and held it toward Colbert, saying:

"A letter from my wife, monseigneur."

Colbert coughed, took, opened, and read the letter, and then put it carefully away in his pocket, while Vanel turned over the leaves of the papers he had brought with him with an unmoved and unconcerned air.

"Vanel," he said suddenly, to his *protégé*, "you are a hard-working man, I know; could twelve hours' daily labor frighten you?"

"I work fifteen hours every day."

"Impossible! A counselor need not work more than three hours a day in the parliament."

"Oh! I am working up some returns for a friend of mine in the department of accounts, and, as I still have time left on my hands, I am studying the Hebrew."

"Your reputation stands high in the parliament, Vanel."

"I believe so, monseigneur."

"You must not grow rusty in your post of counselor."

"What must I do to avoid it?"

"Purchase a high place. Mean and low ambitions are very difficult to satisfy."

"Small purses are the most difficult to fill, monseigneur."

"What post have you in view?" said Colbert.

"I see none—not one."

"There is one, certainly, but one need be almost the king himself to be able to buy it without inconvenience; and the king will not be inclined, I suppose, to purchase the post of procureur-général."

At these words Vanel fixed his at once humble and dull look upon Colbert, who could hardly tell whether Vanel comprehended him or not.

"Why do you speak to me, monseigneur," said Vanel, "of the post of procureur-général to the parliament? I know no other post than the one Monsieur Fouquet fills."

"Exactly so, my dear counselor."

"You are overfastidious, monseigneur; but before the post can be bought, it must be offered for sale."

"I believe, Monsieur Vanel, that it will be for sale before long."

"For sale! What, Monsieur Fouquet's post of procureur-général?"

"So it is said."

"The post which renders him so perfectly inviolable, for sale! Oh, oh!" said Vanel, beginning to laugh.

"Would you be afraid, then, of the post?" said Colbert gravely.

"Afraid! no, but——"

"Nor desirous of obtaining it?"

"You are laughing at me, monseigneur," replied Vanel; "it is likely that a counselor of the parliament would not be desirous of becoming procureur-général?"

"Well, Monsieur Vanel, since I tell you that the post, as report goes, will be shortly for sale——"

"I cannot help repeating, monseigneur, that it is impossible; a man never throws away the buckler behind which he maintains his honor, his fortune, his very life."

"There are certain men mad enough, Vanel, to fancy themselves out of the reach of all mischances."

"Yes, monseigneur; but such men never commit their mad acts for the advantage of the poor Vanels of the world."

"Why not?"

"For the very reason that those Vanels are poor."

"It is true that Monsieur Fouquet's post might cost a good round sum. What would you bid for it, Monsieur Vanel?"

"Everything I am worth."

"Which means?"

"Three or four hundred thousand francs."

"And the post is worth——"

"A million and a half, at the very lowest. I know persons who have offered one million seven hundred thousand francs, without being able to persuade Monsieur Fouquet to sell. Besides, supposing it were to happen that Monsieur Fouquet wished to sell, which I do not believe, in spite of what I have been told——"

"Ah! you have heard something about it, then. Who told you?"

"Monsieur de Gourville, Monsieur Pélisson, and others."

"Very good; if, therefore, Monsieur Fouquet did wish to sell——"

"I could not buy it just yet, since the surintendant will only sell for ready money, and no one has a million and a half to throw down at once."

Colbert suddenly interrupted the counselor by an imperious gesture; he had begun to meditate. Observing his

superior's serious attitude, and his perseverance in continuing the conversation on this subject, Vanel awaited the solution without venturing to precipitate it.

"Explain fully to me the privileges which this post confers."

"The right of impeaching every French subject who is not a prince of the blood; the right of quashing all proceeding, taken against any Frenchman who is neither king nor prince. The procureur-général is the king's right hand to punish the guilty; he is the means whereby also he can evade the administration of justice. Monsieur Fouquet, therefore, will be able, by stirring up the parliaments, to maintain himself even against the king; and the king could as easily, by humoring Monsieur Fouquet, get his edicts registered in spite of every opposition and objection. The procureur-généralship can be made a very useful or a very dangerous instrument."

"Vanel, would you like to be procureur-général?" said Colbert suddenly, softening both his look and his voice.

"I!" exclaimed the latter; "I have already had the honor to represent to you that I want about eleven hundred thousand francs to make up the amount."

"Borrow that sum from your friends."

"I have no friends richer than myself."

"You are an honest and honorable man, Vanel."

"Ah! monseigneur, if the world were to think as you do!"

"I think so, and that is quite enough; and if it should be needed, I will be your security."

"Do not forget the proverb, monseigneur."

"What is it?"

"That he who becomes responsible for another has to pay for his responsibility."

"Let that make no difference."

Vanel rose, quite bewildered by this offer which had been so suddenly and unexpectedly made to him.

"You are not trifling with me, monseigneur?" he said.

"Stay; you say that Monsieur de Gourville has spoken to you about Monsieur Fouquet's post."

"Yes; and Monsieur Pélisson also."

"Officially so, or only by their own suggestion?"

"These were their very words: 'These parliamentary people are as proud as they are wealthy; they ought to club together two or three millions among themselves, to present to their protector and great luminary, Monsieur Fouquet.'"

"And what did you reply?"

"I said that, for my own part, I would give ten thousand francs, if necessary."

"Ah! you like Monsieur Fouquet, then!" exclaimed Colbert, with a look full of hatred.

"No; but Monsieur Fouquet is our chief. He is in debt —is on the high-road to ruin; and we ought to save the honor of the body of which we are members."

"Exactly; and that explains why Monsieur Fouquet will be always safe and sound, so long as he occupies his present post," replied Colbert.

"Thereupon," said Vanel, "Monsieur de Gourville added, 'If we were to do anything out of charity to Monsieur Fouquet, it could not be otherwise than most humiliating to him; and he would be sure to refuse it. Let the parliament subscribe among themselves to purchase, in a proper manner, the post of procureur-général; in that case, all would go on well; the honor of our body would be saved, and Monsieur Fouquet's pride spared."

"That is an opening."

"I considered it so, monseigneur."

"Well, Monsieur Vanel, you will go at once, and find out either Monsieur de Gourville or Monsieur Pélisson. Do you know any other friend of Monsieur Fouquet?"

"I know Monsieur de la Fontaine very well."

"La Fontaine, the rhymester?"

"Yes; he used to write verses to my wife, when Monsieur Fouquet was one of our friends."

"Go to him, then, and try and procure an interview with the surintendant."

"Willingly—but the sum itself?"

"On the day and hour you arrange to settle the matter, Monsieur Vanel, you shall be supplied with the money; so do not make yourself uneasy on that account."

"Monseigneur, such magnificence! You eclipse kings even—you surpass Monsieur Fouquet himself."

"Stay a moment—do not let us mistake each other, I do not make you a present of fourteen hundred thousand francs, Monsieur Vanel; for I have children to provide for —but I will lend you that sum."

"Ask whatever interest, whatever security you please, monseigneur; I am quite ready. And when all your requisitions are satisfied, I will still repeat that you surpass kings and Monsieur Fouquet in munificence. What conditions do you impose?"

"The repayment in eight years, and a mortgage upon the appointment itself."

"Certainly. Is that all?"

"Wait a moment. I reserve to myself the right of purchasing the post from you at one hundred and fifty thousand francs profit for yourself, if, in your mode of filling the office, you do not follow out a line of conduct in conformity with the interests of the king and with my projects."

"Ah! ah!" said Vanel, in a slightly altered tone.

"Is there anything in that which can possibly be objectionable to you, Monsieur Vanel?" said Colbert coldly.

"Oh, no, no!" replied Vanel quickly.

"Very good. We will sign an agreement to that effect whenever you like. And now, go as quickly as you can to Monsieur Fouquet's friends, obtain an interview with the surintendant; do not be too difficult in making whatever concessions may be required of you; and when once the arrangements are all made——"

"I will press him to sign."

"Be most careful to do nothing of the kind; do not speak of signatures with Monsieur Fouquet, nor of deeds, nor even ask him to pass his word. Understand this, otherwise you will lose everything. All you have to do is to get Monsieur Fouquet to give you his hand on the matter. Go, go!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE QUEEN-MOTHER.

The queen-mother was in her bedroom at the Palais Royal, with Mme. de Motteville and the Senora Molina. The king, who had been impatiently expected the whole day, had not made his appearance; and the queen, who had grown quite impatient, had often sent to inquire about him. The whole atmosphere of the court seemed to indicate an approaching storm; the courtiers and the ladies of the court avoided meeting in the antechambers and the corridors, in order not to converse on compromising subjects. Monsieur had joined the king early in the morning for a hunting-party; madame remained in her own apartments, cool and distant to every one; and the queen-mother, after she had said her prayers in Latin, talked of domestic matters with her two friends in pure Castilian. Mme. de Motteville, who understood the language perfectly, answered her in French. When the three ladies had exhausted every

form of dissimulation and of politeness, as a circuitous mode of expressing that the king's conduct was making the queen and the queen-mother pine away from sheer grief and vexation, and when, in the most guarded and polished phrases, they had fulminated every variety of imprecation against Mlle. de la Valliere, the queen-mother terminated her attack by an exclamation indicative of her own reflections and character.

"*Estos hijos!*" said she to Molina—which means, "These children!" words full of meaning on a mother's lips—words full of terrible significance in the mouth of a queen who, like Anne of Austria, hid many curious and dark secrets in her soul.

"Yes," said Molina, "these children! for whom every mother becomes a sacrifice."

"Yes," replied the queen; "a mother has sacrificed everything, certainly."

She did not finish her phrase; for she fancied, when she raised her eyes toward the full-length portrait of the pale Louis XIII., that light had once more flashed from her husband's dull eyes, and that his nostrils were inflated by wrath. The portrait seemed animated by a living expression—speak it did not, but it seemed to menace. A profound silence succeeded the queen's last remark. La Molina began to turn over the ribbons and lace of a large work-table. Mme. de Motteville, surprised at the look of mutual intelligence which had been exchanged between the confidante and her mistress, cast down her eyes like a discreet woman, and, pretending to be observant of nothing that was passing, listened with the utmost attention instead. She heard nothing, however, but a very insignificant "hum!" on the part of the Spanish duenna, who was he perfect representation of extreme caution, and a profound sigh on that of the queen. She looked up immediately.

"You are suffering?" she said.

"No, Motteville, no; why do you say that?"

"Your majesty almost groaned just now."

"You are right; I did sigh, in truth."

"Monsieur Valot is not far off; I believe he is in madame's apartment."

"Why is he with madame?"

"Madame is troubled with nervous attacks."

"A very fine disorder, indeed! There is little good in Monsieur Valot being there, when another physician instead would cure madame."

Mme. de Motteville looked up with an air of great surprise, as she replied:

"Another doctor instead of Monsieur Valot? who do you mean?"

"Occupation, Motteville, occupation. If any one is really ill, it is my poor daughter."

"And your majesty, too."

"Less so this evening, though."

"Do not believe that too confidently, madame," said De Motteville.

And, as if to justify her caution, a sharp, acute pain seized the queen, who turned deathly pale, and threw herself back in the chair, with every symptom of a sudden fainting fit. Molina ran to a richly gilded tortoise-shell cabinet, from which she took a large rock-crystal smelling-bottle, and immediately held it to the queen's nostrils, who inhaled it wildly for a few minutes, and murmured:

"It will hasten my death—but heaven's will be done!"

"Your majesty's death is not so near at hand," added Molina, replacing the smelling-bottle in the cabinet.

"Does your majesty feel better now?" inquired Mme. de Motteville.

"Much better," returned the queen, placing her finger on her lips, to impose silence on her favorite.

"It is very strange," remarked Mme. de Motteville, after a pause.

"What is strange?" said the queen.

"Does your majesty remember the day when this pain attacked you for the first time?"

"I remember only that it was a grievously sad day for me, Motteville."

"But your majesty has not always regarded that day a sad one."

"Why?"

"Because three-and-twenty years before, on that very day, his present majesty, your own glorious son, was born at the very same hour."

The queen uttered a loud cry, buried her face in her hands, and seemed utterly lost for some minutes; but whether from recollections which arose in her mind, or from reflection, or even from sheer pain, it was, of course, uncertain. La Molina darted almost a furious look at Mme. de Motteville, which was so full of bitter reproach that the poor woman, perfectly ignorant of its meaning, was, in her own exculpation, on the point of asking an ex-

planation of its meaning, when, suddenly, Anne of Austria arose, and said:

"Yes, the 5th of September; my sorrow began on the 5th of September. The greatest joy, one day; the deepest sorrow the next; the sorrow," she added, "the bitter expiation of a too excessive joy."

And, from that moment, Anne of Austria, whose memory and reason seemed to have become entirely suspended for a time, remained impenetrable, with vacant look, mind almost wandering, and hands hanging heavily down, as if life had almost departed.

"We must put her to bed," said La Molina.

"Presently, Molina."

"Let us leave the queen alone," added the Spanish attendant.

Mme. de Motteville rose; large and glistening tears were fast rolling down the queen's pallid face; and Molina, having observed this sign of weakness, fixed her black, vigilant eyes upon her.

"Yes, yes," replied the queen. "Leave us, Motteville; go."

The word "us" produced a disagreeable effect upon the ears of the French favorite; for it signified that an interchange of secrets, or of revelations of the past, was about to be made, and that one person was *de trop* in the conversation which seemed likely to take place.

"Will Molina, alone, be sufficient for your majesty tonight?" inquired the French woman.

"Yes," replied the queen.

Mme. de Motteville bowed in submission, and was about to withdraw, when suddenly an old female attendant, dressed as if she had belonged to the Spanish Court of the year 1620, opened the door, and surprised the queen in her tears.

"The remedy!" she cried, delightedly, to the queen, as she unceremoniously approached the group.

"What remedy?" said Anne of Austria.

"For your majesty's sufferings," the former replied.

"Who brings it?" asked Mme. de Motteville eagerly. "Monsieur Valot?"

"No; a lady from Flanders."

"From Flanders? Is she Spanish?" inquried the queen.

"I don't know."

"Who sent her?"

"Monsieur Colbert."

"Her name?"

"She did not mention it."

"Her position in life?"

"She will answer that herself."

"Her face?"

"She is masked."

"Go, Molina; go and see!" cried the queen.

"It is needless," suddenly replied a voice, at once firm and gentle in its tone, which proceeded from the other side of the tapestry hangings; a voice which made the attendants start and the queen tremble excessively. At the same moment a masked female appeared through the hangings, and before the queen could speak a syllable, she added, "I am connected with the order of the Béguines of Bruges, and do indeed bring with me the remedy which is certain to effect a cure of your majesty's complaint."

No one uttered a sound, and the Béguine did not move a step.

"Speak," said the queen.

"I will, when we are alone," was the answer.

Anne of Austria looked at her attendants, who immediately withdrew. The Béguine, thereupon, advanced a few steps toward the queen, and bowed reverently before her. The queen gazed with increasing mistrust at this woman, who, in her turn, fixed a pair of brilliant eyes upon her through her mask.

"The Queen of France must, indeed, be very ill," said Anne of Austria, "if it is known at the Béguinage of Bruges that she stands in need of being cured."

"Your majesty is not irremediably ill."

"But tell me how you happen to know I am suffering?"

"Your majesty has friends in Flanders."

"Since these friends, then, have sent you, mention their names."

"Impossible, madame, since your majesty's memory has not been awakened by your heart."

Anne of Austria looked up, endeavoring to discover through the concealment of the mask, and through her mysterious language, the name of her companion, who expressed herself with such familiarity and freedom; then, suddenly, wearied by a curiosity which wounded every feeling of pride in her nature, she said:

"You are ignorant, perhaps, that royal personages are never spoken to with the face masked."

"Deign to excuse me, madame," replied the Béguine humbly.

"I cannot excuse you. I may, possibly, forgive you, if you throw your mask aside."

"I have made a vow, madame, to attend and aid all afflicted and suffering persons, without ever permitting them to behold my face. I might have been able to administer some relief to your body and to your mind, too; but since your majesty forbids me, I will take my leave. Adieu, madame, adieu!"

These words were uttered with a harmony of tone and respect of manner that deprived the queen of all her anger and suspicion, but did not remove her feeling of curiosity.

"You are right," she said; "it ill-becomes those who are suffering to reject the means of relief which Heaven sends them. Speak, then; and may you, indeed, be able, as you assert you can, to administer relief to my body——"

"Let us first speak a little of the mind, if you please," said the Béguine—"of the mind, which, I am sure, must also suffer."

"My mind?"

"There are cancers so insidious in their nature that their very pulsation is invisible. Such cancers, madame, leave the ivory whiteness of the skin untouched, and marble not the firm, fair flesh with their blue tints; the physician who bends over the patient's chest hears not, though he listens, the insatiable teeth of the disease grinding its onward progress through the muscles as the blood flows freely on; the knife has never been able to destroy, and rarely, even temporarily, to disarm the rage of these mortal scourges; their home is in the mind, which they corrupt; they fill the whole heart until it breaks. Such, madame, are the cancers fatal to queens; are you, too, free from their scourge?"

Anne slowly raised her arm, dazzling in its perfect whiteness, and pure in its rounded outlines, as it was in the time of her earlier days.

"The evils to which you allude," she said, "are the condition of the lives of the high in rank upon earth, to whom Heaven has imparted mind. When those evils become too heavy to be borne, Heaven lightens their burden by penitence and confession. There we lay down our burden and the secrets which oppress us. But, forget not, that the same gracious Heaven, in its mercy, apportions to their trials the strength of the feeble creatures of its hand; and my strength has enabled me to bear my burden. For the secrets of others, the silence of Heaven is more than sufficient; for my own secrets, that of my confessor is just enough."

"You are as courageous, madame, I see, as ever, against your enemies. You do not acknowledge your confidence in your friends."

"Queens have no friends; if you have nothing further to say to me—if you feel yourself inspired by Heaven as a prophetess—leave me, I pray, for I dread the future."

"I should have supposed," said the Béguine resolutely, "that you would rather have dreaded the past."

Hardly had these words escaped her lips, than the queen rose up proudly.

"Speak," she cried, in a short, imperious tone of voice; "explain yourself briefly, quickly, entirely; or, if not——"

"Nay, do not threaten me, your majesty," said the Béguine gently; "I came to you full of compassion and respect. I came here on the part of a friend."

"Prove that to me. Comfort, instead of irritating me."

"Easily enough, and your majesty will see who is friendly to you. What misfortune has happened to your majesty during these twenty-three years past——"

"Serious misfortunes, indeed; have I not lost the king?"

"I speak not of misfortunes of that kind. I wish to ask you, if, since the birth of the king, any indiscretion on a friend's part has caused your majesty the slightest serious anxiety or distress?"

"I do not understand you," replied the queen, setting her teeth hard together in order to conceal her emotion.

"I will make myself understood, then. Your majesty remembers that the king was born on the 5th of September, 1638, at a quarter past eleven o'clock."

"Yes," stammered out the queen.

"At half-past twelve," continued the Béguine, "the dauphin, who had been baptized by Monseigneur de Meaux in the king's and your own presence, was acknowledged as the heir of the crown of France. The king then went to the chapel of the old Château de St. Germain to hear the 'Te Deum' chanted."

"Quite true, quite true," murmured the queen.

"Your majesty's confinement took place in the presence of Monsieur, his majesty's late uncle, of the princes, and of the ladies attached to the court. The king's physician, Bouvard, and Honoré, the surgeon, were stationed in the antechamber; your majesty slept from three o'clock until seven, I believe."

"Yes, yes; but you tell me no more than every one else knows as well as you and myself."

"I am now, madame, approaching that which very few persons are acquainted with. Very few persons, did I say? Alas! I might almost say two only, for formerly there were but five in all, and, for many years past, the secret has been well preserved by the deaths of the principal participators in it. The late king sleeps now with his ancestors; Péronne, the midwife, soon followed him; Laporte is already forgotten."

The queen opened her lips as though about to reply; she felt, beneath her icy hand, with which she kept her face half concealed, the beads of perspiration upon her brow.

"It was eight o'clock," pursued the Béguine; "the king was seated at supper, full of joy and happiness; around him, on all sides, arose wild cries of delight and drinking of healths; the people cheered beneath the balconies; the Swiss Guards, the musketeers, and the Royal Guards wandered through the city, borne about in triumph by the drunken students. Those boisterous sounds of the general joy disturbed the dauphin, the future King of France, who was quietly lying in the arms of Madame de Hausac, his nurse, and whose eyes, as he opened them, and stared about, might have observed two crowns at the foot of his cradle. Suddenly, your majesty uttered a piercing cry, and Dame Péronne immediately flew to your bedside. The doctors were dining in a room at some distance from your chamber; the palace, deserted from the frequency of the irruptions made into it, was without either sentinels or guards. The midwife, having questioned and examined your majesty, gave a sudden exclamation as if in wild astonishment, and taking you in her arms, bewildered, almost out of her senses from sheer distress of mind, dispatched Laporte to inform the king that her majesty the queen-mother wished to see him in her room. Laporte, you are aware, madame, was a man of the most admirable calmness and presence of mind. He did not approach the king as if he were the bearer of alarming intelligence, and wished to inspire the terror which he himself experienced; besides, it was not a very terrifying intelligence which awaited the king. Therefore, Laporte appeared with a smile upon his lips, and approached the king's chair, saying to him: 'Sire, the queen is very happy, and would be still more so to see your majesty.' On that day Louis XIII. would have given his crown away to the veriest beggar for a 'God bless you.' Animated, light-hearted, and full of gayety, the king rose from the table, and said to those around him, in a tone that

Henry IV. might have adopted: 'Gentlemen, I am going to see my wife.' He came to your bedside, madame, at the very moment Dame Péronne presented to him a second prince, as beautiful and healthy as the former, and said: 'Sire, Heaven will not allow the kingdom of France to fall into the female line.' The king, yielding to a first impulse, clasped the child in his arms, and cried: 'Oh, Heaven, I thank Thee!' "

At this part of her recital, the Béguine paused, observing how intensely the queen was suffering; she had thrown herself back in her chair, and with her head bent forward and her eyes fixed, listened without seeming to hear, and her lips moving convulsively, either breathing a prayer to Heaven or in imprecations against the woman standing before her.

"Ah! I do not believe that, because there could be but one dauphin in France!" exclaimed the Béguine, "that if the queen allowed that child to vegetate, banished from his royal parents' presence, she was, on that account, an unfeeling mother. Oh, no, no; there are those alive who know the floods of bitter tears she shed; there are those who have known and witnessed the passionate kisses she imprinted on that innocent creature in exchange for a life of misery and gloom to which state policy condemned the twin brother of Louis XIV."

"Oh, Heaven!" murmured the queen feebly.

"It is admitted," continued the Béguine quickly, "that when the king perceived the effect which would result from the existence of two sons, both equal in age and pretensions, he trembled for the welfare of France, for the tranquillity of the state; and it is equally well known that the Cardinal de Richelieu, by the direction of Louis XIII., thought over the subject with deep attention, and after an hour's meditation in his majesty's cabinet, he pronounced the following sentence: 'One prince is peace and safety for the state; two competitors are civil war and anarchy.' "

The queen rose suddenly from her seat, pale as death, and her hands clinched together.

"You know too much," she said in a hoarse, thick voice, "since you refer to secrets of state. As for the friends from whom you have acquired this secret, they are false and treacherous. You are their accomplice in the crime which is being now committed. Now, throw aside your mask, or I will have you arrested by my captain of the guards. Do not think that this secret terrifies me. You have obtained

it, you shall restore it to me. Never shall it leave your bosom, for neither your secret nor your own life belong to you from this moment."

Anne of Austria, joining gesture to the threat, advanced a couple of steps toward the Béguine.

"Learn," said the latter, "to know and value the fidelity, the honor, and secrecy of the friends you have abandoned."

And then suddenly threw aside her mask.

"Madame de Chevreuse!" exclaimed the queen.

"With your majesty, the sole living confidante of the secret."

"Ah!" murmured Anne of Austria, "come and embrace me, duchess. Alas! you kill your friend in thus trifling with her terrible distress."

And the queen, leaning her head upon the shoulder of the old duchess, burst into a flood of bitter tears.

"How young you are still!" said the latter, in a hollow voice; "you can weep!"

CHAPTER XLIV.

TWO FRIENDS.

The queen looked steadily at Mme. de Chevreuse, and said:

"I believe you just now made use of the word 'happy' in speaking of me. Hitherto, duchess, I had thought it impossible that a human creature could anywhere be found less happy than the Queen of France."

"Your afflictions, madame, have indeed been terrible enough. But by the side of those great and grand misfortunes to which we, two old friends separated by men's malice, were just now alluding, you possess sources of pleasure, slight enough in themselves, it may be, but which are greatly envied by the world."

"What are they?" said Anne of Austria bitterly. "What can induce you to pronounce the word 'pleasure,' duchess—you who, just now, admitted that my body and my mind both stood in need of remedies?"

Mme. de Chevreuse collected herself for a moment, and then murmured:

"How far removed kings are from other people!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that they are so far removed from the vulgar

herd that they forget that others ever stand in need of the bare necessaries of life. They are like the inhabitant of the African mountain, who, gazing from the verdant table-land, refreshed by the rills of melted snow, cannot comprehend that the dwellers in the plains below him are perishing from hunger and thirst in the midst of their lands, burned up by the heat of the sun."

The queen slightly colored, for she now began to perceive the drift of her friend's remark.

"It was very wrong," she said, "to have neglected you."

"Oh, madame, the king, I know, has inherited the hatred his father bore me. The king would dismiss me if he knew I were in the Palais Royal."

"I cannot say that the king is very well disposed toward you, duchess," replied the queen; "but I could—secretly, you know——"

The duchess' disdainful smile produced a feeling of uneasiness in the queen's mind.

"Duchess," she hastened to add, "you did perfectly right to come here, even were it only to give us the happiness of contradicting the report of your death."

"Has it been said, then, that I was dead?"

"Everywhere."

"And yet my children did not go into mourning."

"Ah! you know, duchess, the court is very frequently moving about from place to place; we see Monsieur Albert de Luynes but seldom, and many things escape our minds in the midst of the preoccupations which constantly beset us."

"Your majesty ought not to have believed the report of my death."

"Why not? Alas! we are all mortal; and you may perceive how rapidly, I, your younger sister, as we used formerly to say, am approaching the tomb."

"If your majesty had believed me dead, you ought, in that case, to have been astonished not to have received any news of me."

"Death not unfrequently takes us by surprise, duchess."

"Oh! your majesty, those who are burdened with secrets such as we have just now discussed, must, as a necessity of their nature, satisfy their craving desire to divulge them, and they feel they must gratify that desire before they die. Among the various preparations for their final journey, the task of placing their papers in order is not omitted."

The queen started.

"Your majesty will be sure to learn, in a particular manner, the day of my death."

"In what way?"

"Because your majesty will receive, the next day, under several coverings, everything connected with our mysterious correspondence of former times."

"Did you not burn them?" cried Anne in alarm.

"Traitors only," replied the duchess, "destroy a royal correspondence."

"Traitors, do you say?"

"Yes, certainly, or, rather, they pretend to destroy, instead of which they keep or sell it. Faithful friends, on the contrary, most carefully secrete such treasures, for it may happen that some day or other they would wish to seek out their queen, in order to say to her: 'Madame, I am getting old; my health is fast failing me; in the presence of the danger of death, for there is the danger for your majesty that this secret may be revealed, take, therefore, this paper, so fraught with danger for yourself, and trust not to another to burn it for you.'"

"What paper do you refer to?"

"As far as I am concerned, I have but one, it is true, but that is indeed most dangerous in its nature."

"Oh, duchess, tell me what it is!"

"A letter dated Tuesday, the 2d of August, 1644, in which you beg me to go to Noisy-le-Sec, to see that unhappy child. In your own handwriting, madame, there are those words, 'that unhappy child!'"

A profound silence ensued; the queen's mind was wandering in the past; Mme. de Chevreuse was watching the progress of her scheme.

"Yes, unhappy, most unhappy!" murmured Anne of Austria; "how sad the existence he led, poor child, to finish it in so cruel a manner."

"Is he dead?" cried the duchess, suddenly, with a curiosity whose sincere accents the queen instinctively detected.

"He died of consumption, died forgotten, died withered and blighted like the flowers a lover has given to his mistress, which she leaves to die secreted in a drawer where she had hidden them from the gaze of others."

"Died!" repeated the duchess, with an air of discouragement, which would have afforded the queen the most unfeigned delight had it not been tempered in some measure by a mixture of doubt.

"Died—at Noisy-le-Sec?"

"Yes, in the arms of his tutor, a poor, honest man, who did not long survive him."

"That can easily be understood; it is so difficult to bear up under the weight of such a loss and such a secret," said Mme. de Chevreuse, the irony of which reflection the queen pretended not to perceive.

Mme. de Chevreuse continued:

"Well, madame, I inquired some years ago at Noisy-le-Sec about this unhappy child. I was told that it was not believed he was dead, and that was my reason for not having at first been grieved with your majesty; for, most certainly, if I could have thought it were true, never should I have made the slightest allusion to so deplorable an event, and thus have reawakened your majesty's legitimate distress."

"You say that it is not believed that the child died at Noisy?"

"No, madame."

"What did they say about him, then?"

"They said—but, no doubt, they were mistaken——"

"Nay, speak, speak!"

"They said that one evening, about the year 1645, a lady, beautiful and majestic in her bearing, which was observed notwithstanding the mask and the mantle which concealed her figure—a lady of rank, of very high rank, no doubt—came in a carriage to the place where the road branches off; the very same spot, you know, where I awaited news of the young prince when your majesty was graciously pleased to send me there."

"Well, well?"

"That the boy's tutor, or guardian, took the child to this lady."

"Well, what next?"

"That both the child and his tutor left that part of the country the very next day."

"There, you see there is some truth in what you relate, since, in point of fact, the poor child died from a sudden attack of illness, which makes the lives of all children, as doctors say, suspended, as it were, by a thread."

"What your majesty says is quite true; no one knows it better than you; no one believes it more than myself. But yet, how strange it is——"

"What can it now be?" thought the queen.

"The person who gave me these details, who had been sent to inquire after the child's health——"

"Did you confide such a charge to any one else? Oh, duchess!"

"Some one as dumb as your majesty, as dumb as myself, we will suppose it was myself, madame; this 'some one,' some months after, passing through Touraine——"

"Touraine?"

"Recognized both the tutor and the child, too. I am wrong; he thought he recognized them, both living, cheerful, happy, and flourishing; the one in a green old age, the other in the flower of his youth. Judge, after that, what truth can be attributed to the rumors which are circulated, or what faith, after that, placed in anything that may happen in the world? But I am fatiguing your majesty; it was not my intention, however, to do so, and I will take my leave of you, after renewing to you the assurance of my most respectful devotion."

"Stay, duchess; let us first talk a little about yourself."

"Of myself, madame; I am not worthy that you should bend your looks upon me."

"Why not, indeed? Are you not the oldest friend I have? Are you angry with me, duchess?"

"I, indeed! What motive could I have? If I had reason to be angry with your majesty, should I have come here?"

"Duchess, age is fast creeping on us both; we should be united against that death whose approach cannot be far off."

"You overpower me, madame, with the kindness of your language."

"No one has ever loved or served me as you have done, duchess."

"Your majesty is too kind in remembering it."

"Not so. Give me a proof of your friendship, duchess."

"My whole being is devoted to you, madame."

"The proof I require is, that you should ask something of me."

"Ask——"

"Oh, I know you well—no one is more disinterested, more noble, and truly royal."

"Do not praise me too highly, madame," said the duchess, somewhat anxiously.

"I could never praise you as much as you deserve to be praised."

"And yet, age and misfortune effect a terrible change in people, madame."

"So much the better; for the beautiful, the haughty, the

adored duchess of former days might have answered me ungratefully, 'I do not wish for anything from you.' Heaven be praised! The misfortunes you speak of have indeed worked a change in you, for you will now, perhaps, answer me, 'I accept.'"

The duchess' look and smile soon changed at this conclusion, and she no longer attempted to act a false part.

"Speak, dearest, what do you want?"

"I must first explain to you."

"Do so unhesitatingly."

"Well, then, your majesty can confer the greatest, the most ineffable pleasure upon me."

"What is it?" said the queen, a little distant in her manner, from an uneasiness of feeling produced by this remark. "But do not forget, my good Chevreuse, that I am quite as much under my son's influence as I was formerly under my husband's."

"I will not be too hard, madame."

"Call me as you used to do; it will be a sweet echo of our happy youth."

"Well, then, my dear mistress, my darling Anne——"

"Do you know Spanish still?"

"Yes."

"Ask me in Spanish, then."

"Will your majesty do me the honor to pass a few days with me at Dampierre?"

"Is that all?" said the queen, stupefied. "Nothing more than that?"

"Good heavens! can you possibly imagine that in asking you that, I am not asking you the greatest conceivable favor? If that really be the case, you do not know me. Will you accept?"

"Yes, gladly. And I shall be happy," continued the queen, with some suspicion, "if my presence can in any way be useful to you."

"Useful!" exclaimed the duchess, laughing; "oh, no, no —agreeable, delightful, if you like; and you promise me, then?"

"I swear it," said the queen, whereupon the duchess seized her beautiful hand, and covered it with kisses.

The queen could not help murmuring to herself, "She is a good-hearted woman, and very generous, too."

"Will your majesty consent to wait a fortnight before you come?"

"Certainly; but why?"

"Because," said the duchess, "knowing me to be in disgrace, no one would lend me the hundred thousand francs which I require to put Dampierre into a state of repair. But when it is known that I require that sum for the purpose of receiving your majesty at Dampierre properly, all the money in Paris will be at my disposal."

"Ah!" said the queen, gently nodding her head in sign of intelligence, "a hundred thousand francs! you want a hundred thousand francs to put Dampierre into repair?"

"Quite as much as that."

"And no one will lend you them?"

"No one."

"I will lend them to you, if you like, duchess."

"Oh, I hardly dare accept such a sum."

"You would be wrong if you did not. Besides, a hundred thousand francs is really not much. I know but too well that you never set a right value upon your silence and your secrecy. Push that table a little toward me, duchess, and I will write you an order on Monsieur Colbert; no, on Monsieur Fouquet, who is a far more courteous and obliging man."

"Will he pay it, though?"

"If he will not pay it, I will; but it will be the first time he will have refused me."

The queen wrote and handed the duchess the order, and afterward dismissed her with a warm and cheerful embrace.

CHAPTER XLV.

HOW JEAN DE LA FONTAINE WROTE HIS FIRST TALE.

All these intrigues are exhausted; the human mind, so variously complicated, has been enabled to develop itself at its ease in the three outlines with which our recital has supplied it. It is not unlikely that, in the future we are now preparing, a question of politics and intrigues may still arise, but the springs by which they work will be so carefully concealed that no one will be able to see aught but flowers and paintings, just as at a theater, where a colossus appears upon the scene walking along moved by the small legs and slender arms of a child concealed within the framework.

We now return to St. Mandé, where the surintendant was in the habit of receiving his select society of epicureans.

For some time past the host had met with some terrible trials. Every one in the house was aware of and felt the minister's distress. No more magnificent or recklessly improvident reunions. Money had been the pretext assigned by Fouquet, and never *was* any pretext, as De Gourville said, more fallacious, for there was not the slightest appearance of money.

M. Vatel was most resolutely painstaking in keeping up the reputation of the house, and yet the gardeners who supplied the kitchens complained of a ruinous delay. The agents for the supply of Spanish wines frequently sent drafts which no one honored; fishermen, whom the surintendant engaged on the coast of Normandy, calculated that if they were paid all that was due to them, the amount would enable them to retire comfortably for the rest of their lives; fish, which, at a later period, was the cause of Vatel's death, did not arrive at all. However, on the ordinary day of reception, Fouquet's friends flocked in more numerously than ever. De Gourville and the Abbé Fouquet talked over money matters—that is to say, the abbé borrowed a few pistoles from De Gourville; Pélisson, seated with his legs crossed, was engaged in finishing the peroration of a speech with which Fouquet was to open the parliament; and this speech was a masterpiece, because Pélisson wrote it for his friend—that is to say, he inserted everything in it which the latter would most certainly never have taken the trouble to say of his own accord. Presently Loret and La Fontaine would enter from the garden, engaged in a dispute upon the facility of making verses. The painters and musicians in their turn, also, were hovering near the dining-room. As soon as eight o'clock struck the supper would be announced, for the surintendant never kept any one waiting. It was already half-past seven, and the appetites of the guests were beginning to be declared in a very emphatic manner. As soon as all the guests were assembled, De Gourville went straight up to Pélisson, awoke him out of his reverie, and led him into the middle of a room, and closed the doors.

"Well," he said, "anything new?"

Pélisson raised his intelligent and gentle face, and said:

"I have borrowed twenty-five thousand francs of my aunt, and I have them here in good sterling money."

"Good," replied De Gourville; "we only want one hundred and ninety-five thousand livres for the first payment."

"The payment of what?" asked La Fontaine.

"What! absent as usual! Why, it was you who told us that the small estate at Corbeil was going to be sold by one of Monsieur Fouquet's creditors; and you, also, who proposed that all his friends should subscribe; more than that, too, it was you who said that you would sell a corner of your house at Château-Thierry, in order to furnish your own proportion, and you come and ask, 'The payment of what?' "

This remark was received with a general laugh, which made La Fontaine blush.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "I had not forgotten it; oh, no! only——"

"Only you remembered nothing about it," replied Loret.

"That is the truth, and the fact is, he is quite right; there is a great difference between forgetting and not remembering."

"Well, then," added Pélisson, "you bring your mite in the shape of the price of the piece of land you have sold?"

"Sold? no!"

"Have you not sold the field, then?" inquired De Gourville, in astonishment, for he knew the poet's disinterestedness.

"My wife would not let me," replied the latter, at which there were fresh bursts of laughter.

"And yet you went to Château-Thierry for that purpose," said some one.

"Certainly I did, and on horseback."

"Poor fellow!"

"I had eight different horses, and I was almost jolted to death."

"You are an excellent fellow! And you rested yourself when you arrived there?"

"Rested! Oh, of course I did, for I had an immense deal of work to do."

"How so?"

"My wife had been flirting with the man to whom I wished to sell the land. The fellow drew back from his bargain, and so I challenged him."

"Very good; and you fought?"

"It seems not."

"You know nothing about it, I suppose?"

"No; my wife and her relations interfered in the matter. I was kept a quarter of an hour with my sword in my hand; but I was not wounded."

"And your adversary?"

"Oh, he just as much, for he never came on to the field."

"Capital!" cried his friends, from all sides; "you must have been terribly angry."

"Exceedingly so; I had caught cold; I returned home, and then my wife began to quarrel with me."

"In real earnest?"

"Yes, in real earnest; she threw a loaf of bread at my head—a large loaf."

"And what did you do?"

"Oh! I upset the table over her and her guests; and then I got upon my horse again, and here I am."

Every one had great difficulty in keeping his countenance at the exposure of this heroic-comedy, and when the laughter had somewhat ceased one of the guests present said to him:

"Is that all you have brought us back?"

"Oh, no; I have an excellent idea in my head."

"What is it?"

"Have you noticed that there is a good deal of sportive, jesting poetry written in France?"

"Yes, of course," replied every one.

"And," pursued La Fontaine, "only a very small portion of it is printed."

"The laws are strict, you know."

"That may be, but a rare article is a dear article, and that is the reason why I have written a small poem, excessively free in its style, very broad and extremely cynical in its tone."

"The deuce you have!"

"Yes," continued the poet, with cold indifference, "and I have introduced in it the greatest freedom of language I could possibly employ."

Peals of laughter again broke forth, while the poet was thus announcing the quality of his wares.

"And," he continued, "I have tried to exceed everything that Boccacio, Arétin, and other masters of their craft have written in the same style."

"Its fate is clear," said Pélisson; "it will be scouted and forbidden."

"Do you think so?" said La Fontaine simply; "I assure you I did not do it on my own account so much as on Monsieur Fouquet's."

This wonderful conclusion again raised the mirth of all present.

"And I have sold the first edition of this little book for eight hundred livres!" exclaimed La Fontaine, rubbing his

hands together. "Serious and religious books sell at about half that rate."

"It would have been better," said De Gourville, "to have written two religious books instead."

"It would have been too long, and not amusing enough," replied La Fontaine tranquilly; "my eight hundred livres are in this little bag, and I beg to offer them as my contribution."

As he said this he placed his offering in the hands of their treasurer; it was then Loret's turn, who gavé a hundred and fifty livres; the others stripped themselves in the same way; and the total sum in the purse amounted to forty thousand livres. The money was still being counted over when the surintendant noiselessly entered the room; he had heard everything; and then this man, who had possessed so many milions, who had exhausted all the pleasures and honors that this world had to bestow, this generous heart, this inexhaustible brain, which had, like two burning crucibles, devoured the material and moral substance of the first kingdom in the world, was seen to cross the threshold with his eyes filled with tears, and pass his fingers through the gold and silver which the bag contained.

"Poor offering," he said, in a softened and affected tone of voice; "you will disappear in the smallest corner of my empty purse, but you have filled to overflowing that which no one can ever exhaust, my heart. Thank you, my friends —thank you."

And as he could not embrace every one present, who were all weeping a little, philosophers as they were, he embraced La Fontaine, saying to him:

"Poor fellow! so you have, on my account, been beaten by your wife and censured by your confessor?"

"Oh! it is a mere nothing," replied the poet; "if your creditors will only wait a couple of years, I shall have written a hundred other tales, which, at two editions each, will pay off the debt."

CHAPTER XLVI.

LA FONTAINE IN THE CHARACTER OF A NEGOTIATOR.

Fouquet pressed La Fontaine's hand most warmly, saying to him:

"My dear poet, write a hundred other tales, not only for

the eighty pistoles which each of them will produce you, but, still more, to enrich our language with a hundred other masterpieces of composition."

"Oh! oh!" said La Fontaine, with a little air of pride, "you must not suppose that I have only brought this idea and the eighty pistoles to the surintendant."

"Oh! indeed," was the general acclamation from all parts of the room, "Monsieur de la Fontaine is in funds to-day."

"Heaven bless the idea, if it only brings us one or two millions," said Fouquet gayly.

"Exactly," replied La Fontaine.

"Quick, quick!" cried the assembly.

"Take care," said Pélisson, in La Fontaine's ear; "you have had a most brilliant success up to the present moment, so do not go too far."

"Not at all, Monsieur Pélisson; and you, who are a man of decided taste, will be the first to approve of what I have done."

"We are talking of millions, remember," said De Gourville.

"I have fifteen hundred thousand francs here, Monsieur de Gourville," he replied, striking himself on the chest.

"The deuce take this Gascon from Château-Thierry!" cried Loret.

"It is not the pocket you should touch, but the brain," said Fouquet.

"Stay a moment, Monsieur le Surintendant," added La Fontaine; "you are not procureur-général—you are a poet."

"True, true!" cried Loret, Conrart and every person present connected with literature.

"You are, I repeat, a poet and a painter, a sculptor, a friend of the arts and sciences; but acknowledge that you are no lawyer."

"Oh! I do acknowledge it," replied M. Fouquet, smiling.

"If you were to be nominated at the Academy, you would refuse, I think."

"I think I should, with all due deference to the academicians."

"Very good; if, therefore, you do not wish to belong to the Academy, why do you allow yourself to form one of the parliament?"

"Oh, oh!" said Pélisson, "we are talking politics."

"I wish to know whether the barrister's gown does or does not become Monsieur Fouquet."

"There is no question of the gown at all," retorted Pélisson, annoyed at the laughter of those who were present.

"On the contrary, it is the gown," said Loret.

"Take the gown away from the procureur-général," said Conrart, "and we have Monsieur Fouquet left us still, of whom we have no reason to complain; but, as he is no procureur-général without his gown, we agree with Monsieur de la Fontaine, and pronounce the gown to be nothing but a bugbear."

"*Fugiunt risus leporesque*," said Loret.

"The smiles and the graces," said some one present.

"That is not the way," said Pélisson gravely, "that I translate *lepores*."

"How do you translate it?" said La Fontaine.

"Thus: The hares run away as soon as they see Monsieur Fouquet."

A burst of laughter, in which the surintendant joined, followed this sally.

"But why hares?" objects Conrart, vexed.

"Because the hare will be the very one who will not be overpleased to see Monsieur Fouquet surrounded by all the attributes which his parliamentary strength and power confer on him."

"Oh! oh!" murmured the poets.

"*Quo non ascendant*," said Conrart, "seems impossible to me, when one is fortunate enough to wear the gown of the procureur-général."

"On the contrary, it seems so to me without that gown," said the obstinate Pélisson, "what is your opinion, De Gourville?"

"I think the gown in question is a very good thing," replied the latter; "but I equally think a million and a half is far better than the gown."

"And I am of De Gourville's opinion," exclaimed Fouquet, stopping the discussion by the expression of his own opinion, which would necessarily bear down all the others.

"A million and a half," Pélisson grumbled out; "now I happen to know an Indian fable——"

"Tell it me," said La Fontaine; "I ought to know it, too."

"Tell it, tell it," said the others.

"There was a tortoise, which was, as usual, well protected by its shell," said Pélisson; "whenever its enemies threatened it, it took refuge within its covering. One day some one said to it, 'You must feel very hot in such a house

as that in the summer, and you are altogether prevented showing off your graces; here is a snake here, who will give you a million and a half for your shell.' "

"Good!" said the surintendant, laughing.

"Well, what next?" said La Fontaine, much more interested in the apologue than its moral.

"The tortoise sold his shell and remained naked and defenseless. A vulture happened to see him, and being hungry, broke the tortoise's back with a blow of his beak and devoured it. The moral is, that Monsieur Fouquet should take very good care to keep his gown."

La Fontaine understood the moral seriously.

"You forget Eschylus," he said to his adversary.

"What do you mean?"

"Eschylus was bald-headed, and a vulture—your vulture probably—who was a great amateur in tortoises, mistook at a distance his head for a block of stone, and let a tortoise, which was shrunk up in his shell, fall upon it."

"Yes, yes, La Fontaine is right," resumed Fouquet, who had become very thoughtful; "whenever a vulture wishes to devour a tortoise, he well knows how to break his shell; but too happy is that tortoise which a snake pays a million and a half for his envelope. If any one were to bring me a generous-hearted snake like the one in your fable, Pélisson, I would give him my shell."

"*Rara avis in terris!*" cried Conrart.

"And like a black swan, is he not?" added La Fontaine; "well, then, the bird in question, black and rare, is already found."

"Do you mean to say that you have found a purchaser for my post of procureur-général?" exclaimed Fouquet.

"I have, monsieur."

"But the surintendant never said that he wished to sell," resumed Pélisson.

"I beg your pardon," said Conrart, "you yourself spoke about it, even——"

"Yes, I am a witness to that," said De Gourville.

"He seems very tenacious about his brilliant idea," said Fouquet, laughing. "Well, La Fontaine, who is the purchaser?"

"A perfect blackbird, for he is a counselor belonging to the parliament, an excellent fellow."

"What is his name?"

"Vanel."

"Vanel!" exclaimed Fouquet. "Vanel, the husband of——"

"Precisely, her husband; yes, monsieur."

"Poor fellow!" said Fouquet, with an expression of great interest.

"He wishes to be everything that you have been, monsieur," said De Gourville, "and to do everything that you have done."

"It is very agreeable; tell us all about it, La Fontaine."

"It is very simple. I see him occasionally, and a short time ago I met him, walking about on the Place de la Bastile, at the very moment when I was about to take the small carriage to come down here to St. Mandé."

"He must have been watching his wife," interrupted Loret.

"Oh, no!" said La Fontaine, "he is far from being jealous. He accosted me, embraced me, and took me to the inn called L'Image St. Fiacre, and told me all about his troubles."

"He has his troubles, then?"

"Yes; his wife wants to make him ambitious."

"Well, and he told you——"

"That some one had spoken to him about a post in parliament, that Monsieur Fouquet's name had been mentioned, that ever since, Madame Vanel dreams of nothing else than being called Madame la Procureuse-Générale, and that it makes her ill and keeps her awake every night she does not dream of it."

"The deuce!"

"Poor woman!" said Fouquet.

"Wait a moment. Conrart is always telling me that I do not know how to conduct matters of business; you will see how I managed this one."

"Well, go on."

" 'I suppose you know,' said I to Vanel, 'that the value of a post such as that which Monsieur Fouquet holds is by no means trifling.'

" 'How much do you imagine it to be?' he said.

" 'Monsieur Fouquet, I know, has refused seventeen hundred thousand francs.'

" 'My wife,' replied Vanel, 'had estimated it at about fourteen hundred thousand.'

" 'Ready money?' I said.

" 'Yes; she has sold some property of hers in Guienne, and has received the purchase money.' "

"That's a pretty sum to touch all at once," said the Abbé Fouquet, who had not hitherto said a word.

"Poor Madame Vanel!" murmured Fouquet.

Pélisson shrugged his shoulders, as he whispered in Fouquet's ear:

"That woman is a perfect fiend!"

"That may be; and it will be delightful to make use of this fiend's money to repair the injury which an angel has done herself for me."

Pélisson looked with a surprised air at Fouquet, whose thoughts were from that moment fixed upon a fresh object in view.

"Well," inquired La Fontaine, "what about my negotiation?"

"Admirable, my dear poet."

"Yes," said De Gourville; "but there are some people who are anxious to have the steed who have not money enough to pay for the bridle."

"And Vanel would draw back from his offer if he were to be taken at his word," continued the Abbé Fouquet.

"I do not believe it," said La Fontaine.

"What do you know about it?"

"Why, you have not yet heard the *dénouement* of my story."

"If there is a *dénouement*, why do you beat about the bush so much?"

"*Semper ad eventum.* Is that correct?" said Fouquet, with the air of a nobleman who condescends to barbarisms. To which the Latinists present answered with loud applause.

"My *dénouement*," cried La Fontaine, "is that Vanel, that determined blackbird, knowing that I was coming to St. Mandé, implored me to bring him with me, and, if possible, to present him to Monsieur Fouquet."

"So that?"

"So that he is here; I left him in that part of the grounds called Bel-Air. Well, Monsieur Fouquet, what is your reply?"

"Well, it is not respectful toward Madame Vanel that her husband should run the risk of catching cold outside my house; send for him, La Fontaine, since you know where he is."

"I will go there myself."

"And I will accompany you," said the Abbé Fouquet; "I can carry the money-bags."

"No jesting," said Fouquet seriously; "let the business be a serious one, if it is to be one at all. But, first of all, let us show we are hospitable. Make my apologies, La

Fontaine, to Monsieur Vanel, and tell him how distressed I am to have kept him waiting, but that I was not aware he was there."

La Fontaine set off at once, fortunately accompanied by De Gourville, for, asborbed in his own calculations, the poet would have mistaken the route, and was hurrying as fast as he could toward the village of St. Mandé. Within a quarter of an hour afterward, M. Vanel was introduced into the surintendant's cabinet, the description and details of which have already been given at the beginning of this story. When Fouquet saw him enter, he called to Pélisson, and whispered a few words in his ear.

"Do not lose a word of what I am going to say; let all the silver and gold plate, together with the jewels of every description, be packed up in the carriage. You will take the black horses; the jeweler will accompany you; and you will postpone the supper until Madame de Belliere's arrival."

"Will it be necessary to inform Madame de Belliere of it?" said Pélisson.

"No; that will be useless; I will do that. So, away with you, my dear friend."

Pélisson set off, not quite clear as to his friend's meaning or intention, but confident, like every true friend, in the judgment of the man he was blindly obeying. It is that which constitutes the strength of such men; distrust only arises in the minds of inferior natures. Vanel bowed lowly to the surintendant, and was about to begin a speech.

"Do not trouble yourself, monsieur," said Fouquet politely; "I am told that you wish to purchase a post I hold. How much can you give me for it?"

"It is for you, monseigneur, to fix the amount you require. I know that offers of purchase have already been made to you for it."

"Madame Vanel, I have been told, values it at fourteen hundred thousand livres."

"That is all we have."

"Can you give me the money immediately?"

"I have not the money with me," said Vanel, frightened almost by the unpretending simplicity, amounting to greatness, of the man, for he had expected disputes, and difficulties, and opposition of every kind.

"When will you be able to have it?"

"Whenever you please, monseigneur; "for he began to be afraid that Fouquet was trifling with him.

"If it were not for the trouble you would have in returning to Paris, I would say at once; but we will arrange that the payment and the signature shall take place at six o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Very good," said Vanel, as cold as ice, and feeling quite bewildered.

"Adieu, Monsieur Vanel; present my humblest respects to Madame Vanel," said Fouquet, as he rose; upon which Vanel, who felt the blood rushing up to his head, for he was quite confounded by his success, said, seriously, to the surintendant:

"Will you give me your word, monseigneur, upon this affair?"

Fouquet turned round his head, saying:

"*Pardieu!* and you, monsieur?"

Vanel hesitated, trembled all over, and at last finished by hesitatingly holding out his hand. Fouquet opened and nobly extended his own; this loyal hand lay for a moment in Vanel's moist, hypocritical palm, and he pressed it in his own, in order the better to convince himself of its truth The surintendant gently disengaged his hand, as he again said:

"Adieu."

An then Vanel ran hastily to the door, hurried along the vestibules, and fled away as quickly as he could.

CHAPTER XLVII.

MME. DE BELLIERE'S PLATE AND DIAMONDS.

HARDLY had Fouquet dismissed Vanel, than he began to reflect for a few moments:

"A man never can do too much for the woman he has once loved Marguerite wishes to be the wife of a procureur-général—and why not confer this pleasure upon her? And, now that the most scrupulous and sensitive conscience will be unable to reproach me with anything, let my thoughts be bestowed on her who has shown so much devotion for me. Madame de Belliere ought to be there by this time," he said, as he turned toward the secret door.

After he had locked himself in, he opened the subterranean passage, and rapidly hastened toward the means of communicating between the house at Vincennes and his own residence He had neglected to apprise his friend of

his approach, by ringing the bell, perfectly assured that she would never fail to be exact at the rendezvous; as, indeed, was the case, for she was already waiting. The noise the surintendant made aroused her; she ran to take from under the door the letter that he had thrust there, and which simply said, "Come, marquise; we are waiting supper for you." With her heart filled with happiness, Mme. de Belliere ran to her carirage in the Avenue de Vincennes, and in a few minutes she was holding out her hand to Gourville, who was standing at the entrance, where, in order the better to please his master, he had stationed himself to watch her arrival. She had not observed that Fouquet's black horse had arrived at the same time, smoking and covered with foam, having returned to St. Mandé with Pélisson and the very jeweler to whom Mme. de Belliere had sold her plate and her jewels. Pélisson introduced the goldsmith into the cabinet, which Fouquet had not yet left. The surintendant thanked him for having been good enough to regard as a simple deposit in his hands the valuable property which he had had every right o sell; and he cast his eyes on the total of the account, which amounted to thirteen hundred thousand francs. Then, going for a few moments to his desk, he wrote an order for fourteen hundred thousand francs, payable at sight, at his treasury, before twelve o'clock the next day.

"A hundred thousand francs profit!" cried the goldsmith. "Oh, monseigneur, what generosity!"

"Nay, nay, not so, monsieur," said Fouquet, touching him on the shoulder; "there are certain kindnesses which can never be repaid. The profit is about that which you have made; but the interest of your money still remains to be arranged."

And, saying this, he unfastened from his sleeve a diamond button, which the goldsmith himself had often valued at three thousand pistoles.

"Take this," he said to the goldsmith, "in remembrance of me. And farewell; you are an honest man."

"And you, monseigneur," cried the goldsmith completely overcome, "are the noblest man that ever lived."

Fouquet let the worthy goldsmith pass out of the room by a secret door, and then went to receive Mme. de Belliere, who was already surrounded by all the guests. The marquise was always beautiful, but now her loveliness was more dazzling than ever.

"Do you not think, gentlemen," said Fouquet, "that

madame is more than usually beautiful this evening? And do you happen to know why?"

"Because madame is really the most beautiful of all women," said some one present.

"No; but because she is the best. And yet——"

"Yet?" said the marquise smiling.

"And yet, all the jewels which madame is wearing this evening are nothing but false stones."

At this remark the marquise blushed most painfully.

"Oh, oh!" exclaimed all the guests, "that can very well be said of one who has the finest diamonds in Paris."

"Well?" said Fouquet to Pélisson in a low tone.

"Well, at last I have understood you," returned the latter; "and you have done excellently well."

"Supper is ready, monseigneur," said Vatel with majestic air and tone.

The crowd of guests hurried, less slowly than is usually the case with ministerial entertainments, toward the banqueting-room, where a magnificent spectacle presented itself. Upon the buffets, upon the side-tables, upon the supper-table itself, in the midst of flowers and light, glittered most dazzingly the richest and most costly gold and silver plate that could possibly be seen—relics of those ancient magnificent productions which the Florentine artists, whom the Medici family had patronized, had sculptured, chased, and cast for the purpose of holding flowers, at a time when gold yet existed in France. These hidden marvels, which had been buried during the civil wars, had timidly reappeared during the intervals of that war of good taste called La Fronde; at a time when noblemen fighting against noblemen, killed, but did not pillage one another. All the plate present had Mme. de Belliere's arms engraved upon it.

"Look," cried La Fontaine, "here is a P and a B."

But the most remarkable object present was the cover which Fouquet had assigned to the marquise. Near her was a pyramid of diamonds, sapphires, emeralds, antique cameos, sardonyx stones, carved by the old Greeks of Asia Minor, with mountings of Mysian gold; curious mosaics of ancient Alexandria, mounted in silver; massive Egyptian bracelets lay heaped up in a large plate of Palissy ware, supported by a tripod of gilt bronze which had been sculptured by Benvenuto. The marquise turned pale, as she recognized what she had never expected to see again. A profound silence seemed to seize upon every one of the

restless and excited guests. Fouquet did not even make a sign in dismissal of the richly liveried servants who crowded like bees round the huge buffets and other tables in the room.

"Gentlemen," he said, "all this plate which you behold once belonged to Madame de Belliere, who having observed one of her friends in great distress, sent all this gold and silver, together with the heap of jewels now before her, to her goldsmith. This noble conduct of a devoted friend can well be understood by such friends as you. Happy indeed is that man who sees himself loved in such a manner. Let us drink to the health of Madame de Belliere."

A tremendous burst of applause followed his words, and made poor Mme. de Belliere sink back dumb and breathless in her seat.

"And then," added Pélisson, who was always affected by a noble action, as he was invariably impressed by beauty, "let us also drink to the health of him who inspired madame's noble conduct; for such a man is worthy of being worthily loved."

It was now the marquises' turn. She rose, pale and smiling, and as she held out her glass with a faltering hand, and her trembling fingers touched those of Fouquet, her look, full of love, found its reflection and response in that of her ardent and generous-hearted lover. Begun in this manner, the supper soon became a *fête*; no one tried to be witty, for no one failed in being so. La Fontaine forgot his Gorgny wine, and allowed Vatel to reconcile him to the wines of the Rhone and those from the shores of Spain. The Abbé Fouquet became so kind and good-natured, that De Gourville said to him:

"Take care, Monsieur l'Abbé; if you are so tender, you will be eaten."

"The hours passed away so joyously, that, contrary to his usual custom, the surintendant did not leave the table before the end of the dessert. He smiled upon his friends, delighted as a man is, whose heart becomes intoxicated before his head—and, for the first time, he had just looked at the clock. Suddenly, a carriage rolled into the court-yard, and, strange to say, it was heard high above the noise of the mirth which prevailed. Fouquet listened attentively, and then turned his eyes toward the ante-chamber. It seemed as if he could hear a step passing across it, and that this step, instead of pressing the ground, weighed heavily upon his heart.

"Monsieur d'Herblay, Bishop of Vannes," the usher announced.

And Aramis' grave and thoughtful face appeared upon the threshold of the door, between the remains of two garlands, of which the flame of a lamp had just burned the thread that had united them.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

M. DE MAZARIN'S RECEIPT.

Fouquet would have uttered an exclamation of delight on seeing another friend arrive, if the cold air and averted aspect of Aramis had not restored all his reserve.

"Are you going to join us at our dessert?" he asked. "And yet you would be frightened, perhaps, at the noise which our wild friends here are making?"

"Monseigneur," replied Aramis respectfully, "I will begin by begging you to excuse me for having interrupted this merry meeting; and then I will beg you to give me, as soon as the pleasure shall have finished, a moment's audience on matters of business."

As the word "business" had aroused the attention of some of the epicureans present, Fouquet rose, saying:

"Business first of all, Monsieur d'Herblay; we are too happy when matters of business arrive only at the end of a meal."

As he said this, he took the hand of Mme. de Belliere, who looked at him with a kind of uneasiness, and then led her to an adjoining salon, after having recommended her to the most reasonable of his guests. And then, taking Aramis by the arm, he led him toward his cabinet. As soon as Aramis was there, throwing aside the respectful air he had assumed, he threw himself into a chair, saying:

"Guess whom I have seen this evening?"

"My dear chevalier, every time you begin in that manner, I am sure to hear you announce something disagreeable."

"Well, and this time you will not be mistaken, either, my dear friend," replied Aramis.

"Do not keep me in suspense," added Fouquet phlegmatically.

"Well, then, I have seen Madame de Chevreuse."

"The old duchess, do you mean?"

"Yes."

"Her ghost, perhaps?"

"No, no; the old she-wolf herself."

"Without teeth?"

"Possibly, but not without claws."

"Well, what harm can she meditate against me? I am no miser with women who are not prudes. That is a quality that is always prized, even by the woman who no longer dares to provoke love."

"Madame de Chevreuse knows very well that you are not avaricious, since she wishes to draw some money out of you."

"Indeed! under what pretext?"

"Oh! pretexts are never wanting with her. Let me tell you what hers is; it seems that the duchess has a good many letters of Monsieur de Mazarin's in her possession."

"I am not surprised at that, for the prelate was gallant enough."

"Yes, but these letters have nothing whatever to do with the prelate's love affairs. They concern, it is said, financial matters rather."

"And accordingly they are less interesting."

"Do you not suspect what I mean?"

"Not at all."

"Have you never heard speak of a persecution being instituted for an embezzlement, or appropriation, rather, of public funds?"

"Yes, a hundred, nay, a thousand times. Ever since I have been engaged in public matters I have hardly heard anything else but that. It is precisely your own case, when, as a bishop, people reproach you for your impiety; or, as a musketeer, for your cowardice; the very thing of which they are always accusing ministers of finance is the embezzlement of public funds."

"Very good, but take a particular instance, for the duchess asserts that Monsieur de Mazarin alludes to certain particular instances."

"What are they?"

"Something like a sum of thirteen millions of francs, of which it would be very difficult for you to define the precise nature of the employment."

"Thirteen millions!" said the surintendant, stretching himself in his arm-chair, in order to enable him the more comfortably to look up toward the ceiling.

"Thirteen millions—I am trying to remember them out of all those I have been accused of having stolen."

"Do not laugh, my dear monsieur, for it is very serious. It is positive that the duchess has certain letters in her possession, and that these letters must be as she represents them, since she wished to sell them to me for five hundred thousand francs."

"Oh! one can have a very tolerable calumny got up for such a sum as that," replied Fouquet. "Ah! now I know what you mean;" and he began to laugh heartily.

"So much the better," said Aramis, a little reassured.

"I remember the story of those thirteen millions now. Yes, yes, I remember them quite well."

"I am delighted to hear it; tell me about them."

"Well, then, one day Signor Mazarin, Heaven rest his soul! made a profit of thirteen millions upon a concession of lands in the Valtelline; he canceled them in the registry of receipts, sent them to me, and then made me advance them to him for war expenses."

"Very good; then there is no doubt of their proper destination."

"No; the cardinal made me invest them in my own name, and gave me a receipt."

"You have the receipt?"

"Of course," said Fouquet, as he quietly rose from his chair, and went to his large ebony bureau inlaid with mother-of-pearl and gold.

"What I most admire in you," said Aramis, with an air of great satisfaction, "is, your memory, in the first place, then your self-possession, and, finally, the perfect order which prevails in your administration; you, of all men, too, who are by nature a poet."

"Yes," said Fouquet, "I am orderly out of a spirit of idleness, to save myself the trouble of looking after things, and so I know that Mazarin's receipt is in the third drawer under the letter M; I open the drawer, and place my hand upon the very paper I need. In the night, without a light, I could find it."

And with a confident hand he felt the bundle of papers which were piled up in the open drawer.

"Nay, more than that," he continued, "I remember the paper as if I saw it; it is thick, somewhat crumpled, with gilt edges; Mazarin had made a blot upon the figure of the date. Ah!" he said, "the paper knows we are talking about it, and that we want it very much, and so it hides itself out of the way."

And as the surintendant looked into the drawer, Aramis rose from his seat.

"This is very singular," said Fouquet.

"Your memory is treacherous, my dear monseigneur; look in another drawer."

Fouquet took out the bundle of papers, and turned them over once more; he then became very pale.

"Don't confine your search to that drawer," said Aramis; "look elsewhere."

"Quite useless; I have never made a mistake; no one but myself arranges any papers of mine of this nature; no one but myself ever opens this drawer, of which, besides, no one, with my own exception, is aware of the secret."

"What do you conclude, then?" said Aramis, agitated.

"That Mazarin's receipt has been stolen from me; Mme. de Chevreuse was right, chevalier; I have appropriated the public funds; I have robbed the state coffers of thirteen millions of money; I am a thief, Monsieur d'Herblay."

"Nay, nay, do not get irritated—do not get excited."

"And why not, chevalier? surely there is every reason for it. If the legal proceedings are well arranged, and a judgment is given in accordance with them, your friend the surintendant can follow to Montfauçon his colleague, Enguerrand de Marigny, and his predecessor, Semblançay."

"Oh!" said Aramis, smiling, "not so fast as that."

"And why not? why not so fast? What do you suppose Madame de Chevreuse will have done with those letters, for you refuse them, I suppose?"

"Yes, at once. I suppose that she went and sold them to Monsieur Colbert."

"Well?"

"I said I suppose so; I might have said I was sure of it, for I had her followed, and when she left me, she returned to her own house, went out by a back-door, and proceeded straight to the intendant's house in the Street Croix de Petits Champs."

"Legal proceedings will be instituted, then, scandal and dishonor will follow, and all will fall upon me like a thunderbolt, blindly, harshly, pitilessly."

Aramis approached Fouquet, who sat trembling in his chair, close to the open drawers; he placed his hand on his shoulder, and in an affectionate tone of voice said:

"Do not forget that the position of Monsieur Fouquet can in no way be compared to that of Semblançay or of Marigny."

"And why not, in Heaven's name?"

"Because the proceedings against those ministers were

determined, completed, and the sentence carried out, while in your case the same thing can not take place."

"Another blow, why not? A peculator is, under any circumstances, a criminal."

"Those criminals who know how to find a safe asylum are never in danger."

"What, make my escape! Fly!"

"No, I do not mean that; you forget that all such proceedings originate in the parliament, that they are instituted by the procureur-général, and that you are the procureur-général. You see, that unless you wish to condemn yourself——"

"Oh!" cried Fouquet, suddenly dashing his fist upon the table.

"Well, what? what is the matter?"

"I am procureur-général no longer."

Aramis, at this reply, became as livid as death; he pressed his hands together convulsively, and with a wild, haggard look, which almost annihilated Fouquet, he said, laying a stress upon every distinct syllable:

"You are procureur-général no longer, do you say?"

"No."

"Since when?"

"Since the last four or five hours."

"Take care," interrupted Aramis coldly; "I do not think you are in the full possession of your senses, my friend; collect yourself."

"I tell you," returned Fouquet, "that a little while ago, some one came to me, brought by my friends, to offer me fourteen hundred thousand francs for the appointment, and that I sold the appointment."

Aramis looked as if he had been thunder-stricken; the intelligent and mocking expression of his countenance assumed an aspect of such profound gloom and terror, that it had more effect upon the surintendant than all the exclamations and speeches in the world.

"You had need of money, then?" he said at last.

"Yes; to discharge a debt of honor."

And in a few words he gave Aramis an account of Mme. de Belliere's generosity, and the manner in which he had thought it but right to discharge that act of generosity.

"Yes," said Aramis, "that is, indeed, a fine trait. What has it cost?"

"Exactly the fourteen hundred thousand francs—the price of my appointment."

"Which you received in that manner, without reflection. Oh, imprudent man!"

"I have not yet received the amount, but I shall to-morrow."

"It is not yet completed, then?"

"I must be carried out, though; for I have given the goldsmith, for twelve o'clock to-mororw, an order upon my treasury, into which the purchaser's money will be paid at six or seven o'clock."

"Heaven be praised!" cried Aramis, clapping his hands together, "nothing is yet completed, since you have not yet been paid."

"But the goldsmith?"

"You shall receive the fourteen hundred thousand francs from me at a quarter before twelve."

"Stay a moment; it is at six o'clock, this very morning, that I am to sign."

"Oh! I will answer that you do not sign."

"I have given my word, chevalier."

"If you have given it, you will take it back again, that is all."

"Can I believe what I hear?" cried Fouquet in a most expressive tone. "Fouquet recall his word after it has once been pledged?"

Aramis replied to the almost stern look of the minister by a look full of anger.

"Monsieur," he said, "I believe I have deserved to be called a man of honor? As a soldier, I have risked my life five hundred times; as a priest, I have rendered still greater services, both to the state and to my friends. The value of a word, once passed, is estimated according to the worth of the man who gives it. So long as it is in his own keeping, it is of the purest, finest gold; when his wish to keep it has passed away, it is a two edged sword. With that word, therefore, he defends himself as with an honorable weapon, considering that, when he disregards his word, he endangers his life, and incurs an amount of risk far greater than that which his adversary is likely to derive of profit. In such a case, monsieur, he appeals to Heaven and to justice."

Fouquet bent down his head, as he replied:

"I am a poor, self determined man, a true Breton born; my mind admires and fears yours. I do not say that I keep my word from a proper feeling only; I keep it, if you like, from custom, practice, what you will; but, at all events, the ordinary run of men are simple enough to admire this

custom of mine; it is my sole good quality, leave me such honor as it confers."

"And so you are determined to sign the sale of the very appointment which can alone defend you against all your enemies."

"Yes, I shall sign."

"You will deliver yourself up, then, bound hand and foot, from a false notion of honor, which the most scrupulous casuists would disdain?"

"I shall sign," repeated Fouquet.

Aramis sighed deeply, and looked all round him with the impatient gesture of a man who would gladly dash something to pieces, as a relief to his feelings.

"We have still one means left," he said, "and I trust you will not refuse to make use of that."

"Certainly not, if it be loyal and honorable, as everything is, in fact,, which you propose."

"I know nothing more loyal than the renunciation of your purchaser. Is he a friend of yours?"

"Certainly; but——"

" 'But!'—if you allow me to manage the affair, I do not despair."

"Oh! you shall be absolutely master, to do what you please."

"Whom are you in treaty with? What man is it?"

"I am not aware whether you know the parliament."

"Most of its members. One of the presidents, perhaps?"

"No; only a counselor, of the name of Vanel."

Aramis became perfectly purple.

"Vanel!" he cried, rising abruptly from his seat, "Vanel! the husband of Marguerite Vanel?"

"Exactly."

"Of your former mistress?"

"Yes, my dear fellow; she is anxious to be the wife of the procureur-général. I certainly owed poor Vanel that slight concession, and I am a gainer by it; since I, at the same time, can confer a pleasure on his wife."

Aramis walked up straight to Fouquet, and took hold of his hand.

"Do you know," he said very calmly, "the name of Madame Vanel's new lover?"

"Ah! she has a new lover, then? I was not aware of it; no, I have no idea what his name is."

"His name is Monsieur Jean-Baptiste Colbert; he is intendant of the finances; he lives in the Rue Croix des

Petits Champs, where Madame de Chevreuse has been this evening to take him Mazarin's letters, which she wishes to sell."

"Gracious Heaven!" murmured Fouquet, passing his hand across his forehead, from which the perspiration was starting.

"You now begin to understand, do you not?"

"That I am utterly lost!—yes."

"Do you now think it worth while to be so scrupulous with regard to keeping your word?"

"Yes," said Fouquet.

"These obstinate people always contrive matters in such a way that one cannot but admire them all the while," murmured Aramis.

Fouquet held out his hand to him, and, at the very moment, a richly ornamented tortoise-shell clock, supported by golden figures, which was standing on a console-table opposite to the fireplace, struck six. The sound of a door being opened in the vestibule was heard, and De Gourville came to the door of the cabinet to inquire if Fouquet would receive M. Vanel. Fouquet turned his eyes from the eyes of Aramis, and then desired that M. Vanel should be shown in to him.

CHAPTER XLIX.

M. COLBERT'S ROUGH DRAFT.

Vanel, who entered at this stage of the conversation, was nothing less for Aramis and Fouquet than the full stop which completes a phrase. But, for Vanel, Aramis' presence in Fouquet's cabinet had quite another signification; and, therefore, at his first step into the room, he paused as he looked at the delicate yet firm features of the bishop of Vannes, and his look of astonishment soon became one of scrutinizing attention. As for Fouquet, a perfect politician that is to say, complete master of himself, he had already, by the energy of his own resolute will, contrived to remove from his face all traces of the emotion which Aramis' revelation had occasioned. He was no longer, therefore, a man overwhelmed by misfortune and reduced to resort to expedients; he held his head proudly erect, and indicated by a gesture that Vanel could enter. He was now the first minister of the state, and in his own palace. Aramis knew

the surintendant well; the delicacy of the feelings of his heart and the exalted nature of his mind could not any longer surprise him. He confined himself, then, for the moment—intending to resume later an active part in the conversation—to the performance of the difficult part of a man who looks on and listens, in order to learn and understand. Vanel was visibly overcome, and advanced into the middle of the cabinet, bowing to everything and everybody.

"I am come," he said.

"You are exact, Monsieur Vanel," returned Fouquet.

"In matters of business, monseigneur," replied Vanel, "I look upon exactitude as a virtue."

"No doubt, monsieur."

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Aramis, indicating Vanel with his finger, but addressing himself to Fouquet; "this is the gentleman, I believe, who has come about the purchase of your appointment?"

"Yes, I am," replied Vanel, astonished at the extremely haughty tone with which Aramis had put the question; "but in what way am I to address you, who do me the honor——"

"Call me monseigneur," replied Aramis dryly.

Vanel bowed.

"Come, gentlemen, a truce to these ceremonies, let us proceed to the matter itself."

"Monseigneur sees," said Vanel, "that I am waiting your pleasure."

"On the contrary, I am waiting," replied Fouquet.

"What for, may I be permitted to ask, monseigneur?"

"I thought that you had perhaps something to say."

"Oh," said Vanel to himself, "he has reflected on the matter, and I am lost." But, resuming his courage, he continued, "No, monseigneur, nothing, absolutely nothing more than what I said to you yesterday, and which I am again ready to repeat to you now."

"Come, now, tell me frankly, Monsieur Vanel, is not the affair rather a burdensome one for you?"

"Certainly, monseigneur, fourteen hundred thousand francs is an important sum."

"So important, indeed," said Fouquet, "that I have reflected——"

"You have been reflecting, do you say, monseigneur?" exclaimed Vanel anxiously.

"Yes; that you might not yet be in a position to purchase."

"Oh, monseigneur!"

"Do not make yourself uneasy on that score, Monsieur Vanel; I shall not blame you for a failure in your word, which evidently may arise from inability on your part."

"Oh, yes, monseigneur, you would blame me, and you would be right in doing so ," said Vanel; "for a man must either be very imprudent, or a perfect fool, to undertake engagements which he cannot keep; and I, at least, have always regarded a thing agreed upon as a thing actually carried out."

Fouquet colored, while Aramis uttered a "Hum!" of impatience.

"You would be wrong to exaggerate such notions as those, monsieur," said the surintendant; "for a man's mind is variable, and full of these very excusable caprices, which are, however, sometimes estimable enough; and a man may have wished for something yesterday of which he repents to-day."

Vanel felt a cold sweat trickle down his face.

"Monseigneur!" he muttered.

Aramis who was delighted to find the surintendant carry on the debate with such clearness and precision, stood leaning his arm upon the marble top of a console, and began to play with a small gold knife with a malachite handle. Fouquet did not hurry himself to reply; but after a moment's pause:

"Come, my dear Monsieur Vanel," he said, "I will explain to you how I am situated."

Vanel began to tremble.

"Yesterday I wished to sell——"

"Monseigneur did more than wish to sell, for you actually sold."

"Well, well, that may be so; but to-day I ask you the favor to restore me my word which I pledged you."

"I received your word as a perfect assurance that it would be kept."

"I know that, and that is the reason why I now entreat you; do you understand me? I entreat you to restore it to me."

Fouquet suddenly paused. The words "I entreat you," the effect of which he did not immediately perceive, seemed almost to choke him as he uttered them. Aramis, still playing with his knife, fixed a look upon Vanel which seemed as if he wished to penetrate to the inmost recesses of his heart. Vanel simply bowed, as he said:

"I am overcome, monseigneur, at the honor you do me to consult me upon a matter of business which is already completed; but——"

"Nay, do not say 'but,' dear Monseiur Vanel."

"Alas! monseigneur, you see," he said, as he opened a large pocket-book "I have brought the money with me—the whole sum, I mean. And here, monseigneur, is the contract of sale which I have just effected of property belonging to my wife. The order is authentic in every way, the necessary signatures have been attached to it, and it is made payable at sight; it is ready money, in fact, and, in one word, the whole affair is complete."

"My dear Monsieur Vanel, there is not a matter of business in this world, however important it may be, which can not be postponed in order to oblige a man, who by that means might and would be made a devoted friend."

"Certainly," said Vanel awkwardly.

"And much more justly acquired would that friend become, Monsieur Vanel, since the value of the service he had received would have been so considerable. Well, what do you say? what do you decide?"

Vanel preserved a perfect silence. In the meantime, Aramis had continued his close observation of the man. Vanel's narrow face, his deeply sunk orbits, his arched eyebrows, had revealed to the bishop of Vannes the type of an avaricious and ambitious character. Aramis' method was to oppose one passion by another. He saw that Fouquet was defeated—morally subdued—and so he came to his rescue with fresh weapons in his hands.

"Excuse me, monseigneur," he said; "you forget to show Monsieur Vanel that his own interests are diametrically opposed to this renunciation of the sale."

Vanel looked at the bishop with astonishment; he had hardly expected to find an auxiliary in him. Fouquet also paused to listen to the bishop.

"Do you not see," continued Aramis, "that Monsieur Vanel, in order to purchase your appointment, has been obliged to sell a property which belongs to his wife; well, that is no slight matter, for one cannot displace, as he has done, fourteen or fifteen hundred thousand francs without some considerable loss, and a very serious inconvenience."

"Perfectly true," said Vanel, whose secret Aramis had, with his keen-sighted gaze, wrung from the bottom of his heart.

"Inconveniences such as these are matters of great ex-

pense and calculation, and whenever a man has money matters to deal with, the expenses are generally the very first thing thought of."

"Yes, yes," said Fouquet, who began to understand Aramis' meaning.

Vanel remained perfectly silent; he, too, had understood him. Aramis observed his coldness of manner and his silence.

"Very good," he said to himself; "you are waiting, I see, until you know the amount; but do not fear, I shall send you such a flight of crowns that you cannot but capitulate on the spot."

"We must offer Monsieur Vanel a hundred thousand crowns at once," said Fouquet, carried away by his generous feelings.

The sum was a good one. A prince, even, would have been satisfied with such a bonus. A hundred thousand crowns, at that period, was the dowry of a king's daughter. Vanel, however, did not move.

"He is a perfect rascal!" thought the bishop. "Well, we must offer the five hundred thousand francs at once;" and he made a sign to Fouquet accordingly.

"You seem to have spent more than that, dear Monsieur Vanel," said the surintendant. "The price of money is enormous. You must have made a great sacrifice in selling your wife's property. Well, what can I have been thinking of? I ought to have offered to sign you an order for five hundred thousand francs; and even in that case I shall feel that I am greatly indebted to you."

There was not a gleam of delight or desire on Vanel's face, which remained perfectly impassible, not a muscle of it changed in the slightest degree. Aramis cast a look almost of despair at Fouquet, and then, going straight up to Vanel, and taking hold of him by the coat, in a familiar manner, he said:

"Monsieur Vanel, it is neither the inconvenience, nor the displacement of your money, nor the sale of your wife's property, even, that you are thinking of at this moment; it is something more important still. I can well understand it; so pay particular attention to what I am going to say."

"Yes, monseigneur," Vanel replied, beginning to tremble in every limb, as the prelate's eyes seem almost ready to devour him.

"I offer you, therefore, in the surintendant's name, not three hundred thousand livres, nor five hundred thousand,

but a million. A million—do you understand me?" he added, as he shook him nervously.

"A million!" repeated Vanel, as pale as death.

"A million; in other words, at the present rate of interest, an income of seventy thousand francs."

"Come, monsieur," said Fouquet, "you can hardly refuse that. Answer—do you accept?"

"Impossible," murmured Vanel.

Aramis bit his lips, and something like a white cloud seemed to pass over his face. The thunder behind this cloud could easily be imagined. He still kept his hold on Vanel.

"You have purchased the appointment for fifteen hundred thousand francs, I think. Well, you will receive these fifteen hundred thousand francs back again; by paying Monsieur Fouquet a visit, and shaking hands with him on the bargain, you will have become a gainer of a million and a half. You get honor and profit at the same time, Monsieur Vanel."

"I cannot do it," said Vanel hoarsely.

"Very well," replied Aramis, who had grasped Vanel so tightly by the coat that when he let go his hold Vanel staggered back a few paces, "very well; one can now see clearly enough your object in coming here."

"Yes," said Fouquet, "one can easily see that."

"But—" said Vanel, attempting to stand erect before the weakness of these two men of honor.

"Does the fellow presume to speak?" said Aramis, with the tone of an emperor.

"Fellow!" repeated Vanel.

"The wretch, I meant to say," added Aramis, who had now resumed his usual self-possession. "Come, monsieur, produce your deed of sale—you have it about you, I suppose, in one of your pockets, already prepared, as an assassin holds his pistol or his dagger concealed under his cloak."

Vanel began to mutter something.

"Enough!" cried Fouquet. "Where is this deed?"

Vanel tremblingly searched in his pockets, and as he drew out his pocketbook, a paper fell out of it, while Vanel offered the other to Fouquet. Aramis pounced upon the paper which had fallen out as soon as he recognized the handwriting.

"I beg your pardon," said Vanel, "that is a rough draft of the deed."

"I see that very clearly," retorted Aramis, with a smile

far more cutting than a lash of a whip would have been; "and what I admire most is, that this draft is in Monsieur Colbert's handwriting. Look, monseigneur, look!"

And he handed the draft to Fouquet, who recognized the truth of the fact; for, covered with erasures, with inserted words, the margins filled with additions, this deed—a living proof of Colbert's plot—had just revealed everything to its unhappy victim.

"Well!" murmured Fouquet.

Vanel, completely humiliated, seemed as if he were looking for some deep hole where he could hide himself.

"Well!" said Aramis, "if your name were not Fouquet, and if your enemy's name were not Colbert—if you had not this mean thief before you, I should say to you, 'Repudiate it;' such a proof as this absolves you from your word; but these fellows would think you were afraid; they would fear less than they do; therefore, sign the deed at once."

And he held out a pen toward him.

Fouquet pressed Aramis' hand; but, instead of the deed which Vanel handed to him, he took the rough draft of it.

"No, not that paper," said Aramis hastily; "this is the one. The other is too precious a document for you to part with."

"No, no," replied Fouquet; "I will sign under Monsieur Colbert's own handwriting even; and I write, 'The handwriting is approved of.'" He then signed, and said, "Here it is, Monsieur Vanel."

And the latter seized the paper, laid down his money, and was about to make his escape.

"One moment," said Aramis. "Are you quite sure the exact amount is there? It ought to be counted over, Monsieur Vanel; particularly since Monsieur Colbert makes presents of money to ladies, I see. Ah! that worthy Monsieur Colbert is not so generous as Monsieur Fouquet."

And Aramis, spelling every word, every letter of the order to pay, distilled his wrath and his contempt, drop by drop, upon the miserable wretch, who had to submit to this torture for a quarter of an hour; he was then dismissed, not in words, but by a gesture, as one dismisses or discharges a beggar or a menial.

As soon as Vanel had g ne, the minister and the prelate, their eyes fixed on each other, remained silent for a few moments.

"Well," said Aramis, the first to break the silence; "to what can that man be compared, who, at the very moment

he is on the point of entering into a conflict with an enemy armed from head to foot, thirsting for his life, presents himself for the contest quite defenseless, throws down his arms, and smiles and kisses his hands to his adversary in the most gracious manner? Good faith, Monsieur Fouquet, is a weapon which scoundrels very frequently make use of against men of honor, and it answers their purpose. Men of honor ought, in their turn, also, to make use of dishonest means against such scoundrels. You would soon see how strong they would become, without ceasing to be men of honor."

"What they did would be termed the acts of a scoundrel," replied Fouquet.

"Far from that; it would be merely coquetting or playing with the truth. At all events, since you have finished with this Vanel; since you have deprived yourself of the happiness of confounding him by repudiating your word, and since you have given up, for the purpose of being used against yourself, the only weapon which can ruin you——"

"My dear friend," said Fouquet mournfully, "you are like the teacher of philosophy whom La Fontaine was telling us about the other day; he saw a child drowning, and began to read him a lecture divided into three heads."

Aramis smiled as he said:

"Philosophy—yes; teacher—yes; a drowning child—yes; but a child that can be saved—you shall see. But, first of all, let us talk about business. Did you not some time ago," he continued, as Fouquet looked at him with a bewildered air, "speak to me about an idea you had of giving a *fête* at Vaux?"

"Oh," said Fouquet, "that was when affairs were flourishing."

"A *fête*, I believe, to which the king invited himself of his own accord?"

"No, no, my dear prelate; a *fête* to which Monsieur Colbert advised the king to invite himself."

"Ah—exactly; as it would be a *fête* of so costly a character that you would be ruined in giving it."

"Precisely so. In other times, as I said just now, I had a kind of pride in showing my enemies how inexhaustible my resources were; I felt it a point of honor to strike them with amazement, in creating millions under circumstances where they imagined nothing but bankruptcies and failures would follow. But at the present day I am arranging my accounts with the state, with the king, with myself; and I

must now become a mean, stingy man; I shall be able to prove to the world that I can act or operate with my *deniers* as I used to do with my bags of pistoles, and from to-morrow my equipages shall be sold, my mansions mortgaged, my expenses contracted."

"From to-morrow," interrupted Aramis quietly, "you will occupy yourself, without the slightest delay, with your *fête* at Vaux, which must hereafter be spoken of as one of the most magnificent productions of your most prosperous days."

"You are mad, Chevalier d'Herblay!"

"I?—you do not think that?"

"What do you mean, then? Do you not know that a *fête* at Vaux, of the very simplest possible character, would cost four or five millions?"

"I do not speak of a *fête* of the very simplest possible character, my dear surintendant."

"But since the *fête* is to be given to the king," replied Fouquet, who misunderstood Aramis' idea, "it cannot be simple."

"Just so; it ought to be on a scale of the most unbounded magnificence."

"In that case I shall have to spend ten or twelve millions."

"You shall spend twenty, if you require it," said Aramis, in a perfectly calm voice.

"Where shall I get them?" exclaimed Fouquet.

"That is my affair, Monsieur le Surintendant; and do not be uneasy for a moment about it. The money will be placed at once at your disposal, as soon as you shall have arranged the plans of your *fête*."

"Chevalier! chevalier!" said Fouquet, giddy with amazement, "whither are you hurrying me?"

"Across the gulf into which you were about to fall," replied the bishop of Vannes. "Take hold of my cloak, and throw fear aside."

"Why did you not tell me that sooner, Aramis? There was a day when, with one million only, you could have saved me; while to-day——"

"While to-day I can give you twenty," said the prelate.

"Such is the case, however—the reason is very simple. On the day you speak of, I had not the million which you had need of at my disposal, while now I can easily procure the twenty millions we require."

"May Heaven hear you, and save me!"

Aramis resumed his usual smile, the expression of which was so singular.

"Heaven never fails to hear me," he said.

"I abandon myself to you unreservedly," Fouquet murmured.

"No, no; I do not understand it in that manner. I am unreservedly devoted to you. Therefore, as you have the clearest, the most delicate, and the most ingenious mind of the two, you shall have entire control over the *fête*, even to the very smallest details. Only——"

"Only?" said Fouquet, as a man accustomed to understand and appreciate the value of a parenthesis.

"Well, then, leaving the entire invention of the details to you, I shall reserve to myself a general superintendence over the execution."

"In what way?"

"I mean, that you will make of me, on that day, a major-domo, a sort of inspector-general, or factotum—something between a captain of the guard and manager or steward. I will look after the people, and will keep the keys of the doors. You will give your orders, of course; but will give them to no one but me. They will pass through my lips, to reach those for whom they are intended—you understand?"

"No, I am very far from understanding."

"But you agree?"

"Of course, of course, my friend."

"That is all I care about, then. Thanks; and now go and prepare your list of invitations."

"Whom shall I invite?"

"Every one."

CHAPTER L.

IN WHICH THE AUTHOR THINKS IT IS NOW TIME TO RETURN TO THE VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE.

Our readers will have observed in this story the adventures of the new and of the past generation being detailed, as it were, side by side. To the former, the reflection of the glory of earlier years, the experience of the bitter things of this world; to the former, also, that peace which takes possession of the heart, and that healing of the scars which were formerly deep and painful wounds. To the latter, the

conflicts of love and vanity; bitter disappointments, and ineffable delights; life instead of memory. If, therefore, any variety has been presented to the reader in the different episodes of this tale, it is to be attributed to the numerous shades of color which are presented on this double palette, where two pictures are seen side by side, mingling and harmonizing their severe and pleasing tones. The repose of the emotions of one is found in the bosom of the emotions of the other. After having talked reason with older heads, one loves to talk nonsense with youth. Therefore, if the threads of this story do not seem very intimately to connect the chapter we are now writing with that we have just written, we do not intend to give ourselves any more thought or trouble about it than Rudysdael took in painting an autumn sky after having finished a spring-time scene. We wish our readers to do as much, and to resume Raoul de Bragelonne's story at the very place where our last sketch left him.

In a state of frenzy and dismay, or, rather, without power or will of his own—without knowing what to do—he fled heedlessly away, after the scene in La Valliere's room. The king, Montalais, Louise, that chamber, that strange exclusion, Louise's grief, Montalais' terror, the king's wrath—all seemed to indicate some misfortune. But what? He had arrived from London because he had been told of the existence of a danger; and almost on his arrrival this appearance of danger was manifest. Was not this sufficient for a lover? Certainly it was, but it was insufficient for a pure and upright heart such as his. And yet Raoul did not seek for explanations in the very quarter where all jealous or less timid lovers would have done. He did not go straightway to his mistress, and say, "Louise, is it true that you love me no longer? Is it true that you love another?" Full of courage, full of friendship as he was full of love; a religious observer of his word, and believing blindly the word of others, Raoul said within himself, "De Guiche wrote to put me on my guard; De Guiche knows something; I will go and ask De Guiche what he knows, and tell him what I have seen." The journey was not a long one. De Guiche, who had been brought from Fontainebleau to Paris within the last two days, was beginning to recover from his wound, and to walk about a little in his room. He uttered a cry of joy as he saw Raoul, earnest in his friendship, enter his apartment. Raoul, too, had not been able to refrain from exclaiming aloud, when he saw De Guiche, so pale, so

thin, so melancholy. A very few words, and a simple gesture which De Guiche made to put aside Raoul's arm, were sufficient to inform the latter of the truth.

"Ah! so it is," said Raoul, seating himself beside his friend, "one loves and dies."

"No, no, not dies," replied De Guiche, smiling, "since I am now recovering, and since, too, I can press you in my arms."

"Ah! I understand."

"And I understand you, too. You fancy I am unhappy, Raoul?"

"Alas!"

"No; I am the happiest of men. My body suffers, but not my mind or my heart. If you only knew— Oh! I am, indeed, the very happiest of men."

"So much the better," said Raoul; "so much the better, provided it lasts."

"It is over. I have had enough happiness to last me to my dying day, Raoul."

"I have no doubt you have had; but she——"

"Listen; I love her, because—but you are not listening to me."

"I beg your pardon."

"Your mind is preoccupied."

"Yes; your health, in the first place——"

"It is not that, I know."

"My dear friend, you would be wrong, I think, to ask me any questions—*you*, of all persons in the world;" and he laid so much weight upon the "you," that he completely enlightened his friend upon the nature of the evil, and the difficulty of remedying it.

"You say that, Raoul, on account of what I wrote to you."

"Certainly. We will talk over that matter a little, when you shall have finished telling me of all your own pleasures and pains."

"My dear friend, I am entirely at your service now."

"Thank you; I have hurried, I have flown here; I came in half the time the government couriers usually take. Now tell me, my dear friend, what did you want?"

"Nothing whatever, but to make you come."

"Well, then, I am here."

"All is quite right, then."

"There must have been something else, I suppose?"

"No, indeed."

"De Guiche!"

"Upon my honor!"

"You cannot possibly have crushed all my hopes so violently, or have exposed me to being disgraced by the king for my return, which is in disobedience of his orders—you cannot, I say, have planted jealousy in my heart, merely to say to me, 'It is all right, be perfectly easy.'"

"I do not say to you, Raoul, 'Be perfectly easy;' but pray understand me; I never will, nor can I, indeed, tell you anything else."

"What sort of person do you take me for?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you know anything, why conceal it from me? If you do not know anything, why did you write so warningly?"

"True, true, I was very wrong, and I regret having done so, Raoul. It seems nothing to write to a friend and say, 'Come;' but to have this friend face to face, to feel him tremble, and breathlessly and anxiously wait to hear what one hardly dare tell him, is very different."

"Dare! I have courage enough, if you have not," exclaimed Raoul in despair.

"See how unjust you are, and how soon you forget you have to do with a poor wounded fellow, such as your unhappy friend is. So, calm yourself, Raoul. I said to you, 'Come' —you are here, so ask me nothing further."

"Your object in telling me to come was your hope that I should see with my own eyes, was it not? Nay, do not hesitate, for I have seen all."

"Oh!" exclaimed De Guiche.

"Or, at least, I thought——"

"There, now, you see you are not sure. But if you have any doubt, my poor friend, what remains for me to do?"

"I saw Louise much agitated—Montalais in a state of bewilderment—the king——"

"The king?"

"Yes. You turn your head aside. The danger is there, the evil is there; tell me, is it not so, is it not the king?"

"I say nothing."

"Oh! you say a thousand upon a thousand times more than nothing. Give me facts, for pity's sake, give me proofs. My friend, the only friend I have, speak—tell me all. My heart is crushed, wounded to death; I am dying from despair."

"If that really be so, as I see it is indeed, dear Raoul," replied De Guiche, "you relieve me from my difficulty, and

I will tell you all, perfectly sure that I can tell you nothing but what is consoling, compared to the despair from which I now see you suffering."

"Go on—go on; I am listening."

"Well, then, I can only tell you what you can learn from every person you meet."

"From every one, do you say? It is talked about, then?"

"Before you say people talk about it, learn what it is that people can talk about. I assure you solemnly that people only talk about what may, in truth, be very innocent; perhaps a walk——"

"Ah! a walk with the king?"

"Yes, certainly, a walk with the king; and I believe the king has already very frequently before taken walks with ladies, without on that account——"

"You would not have written to me, shall I say again, if there had been nothing unusual in this promenade?"

"I knew that while the storm lasted it would have been far better if the king had taken shelter somewhere else, than to have remained with his head uncovered before La Valliere; but the king is so very courteous and polite."

"Oh! De Guiche, De Guiche, you are killing me!"

"Do not let us talk any more, then."

"Nay, let us continue. This walk was followed by others, I suppose?"

"No—I mean yes; there was the adventure of the oak, I think. But I know nothing about the matter at all." Raoul rose; De Guiche endeavored to imitate him, notwithstanding his weakness. "Well, I will not add another word; I have said either too much or not enough. Let others give you further information, if they will, or if they can; my duty was to warn you, and that I have done. Watch over your own affairs now, yourself."

"Question others! Alas! you are no true friend to speak to me in that manner," said the young man in utter distress. "The first man I may meet may be either evilly disposed, or a fool; if the former, he will tell me a lie to make me suffer more than I do now; if the latter, he will do far worse still.

"Ah! De Guiche, De Guiche, before two hours are over, I shall have been told ten falsehoods, and shall have as many duels on my hands. Save me, then; is it not best to know the whole misfortune?"

"But I know nothing, I tell you; I was wounded, attacked by fever; my senses were gone, and I have only a very

faint recollection of it all. But there is no reason why we should search very far, when the very man we want is close at hand. Is not D'Artagnan your friend?"

"Oh, true, true!"

"Go to him, then. He will be able to throw some light on the subject."

At this moment a lackey entered the room.

"What is it?" said De Guiche.

"Some one is waiting for monseigneur in the Cabinet des Porcelaines."

"Very well. Will you excuse me, my dear Raoul? I am so proud since I have been able to walk again."

"I would offer you my arm, De Guiche, if I did not guess that the person in question is a lady."

"I believe so," said De Guiche, smiling, as he quitted Raoul.

Raoul remained motionless, absorbed in his grief, overwhelmed, like the miner upon whom a vault has just fallen in, who, wounded, his life-blood welling fast, his thoughts confused, endeavors to recover himself, and to save his life and to preserve his reason. A few minutes were all Raoul needed to dissipate the bewildering sensations which had been occasioned by these two revelations. He had already recovered the thread of his ideas, when, suddenly, through the door, he fancied he recognized Montalais' voice in the Cabinet des Porcelaines.

"She!" he cried. "Yes, it is indeed her voice. She will be able to tell me the whole truth; but shall I question her here? She conceals herself even from me; she is coming no doubt from madame. I will see her in her own apartment. She will explain her alarm, her flight, the strange manner in which I was driven out; she will tell me all that —after Monsieur d'Artagnan, who knows everything, shall have given me fresh strength and courage. Madame, a coquette, I fear, and yet a coquette who is herself in love, has her moments of kindness; a coquette who is as capricious and uncertain as life or death, but who tells De Guiche that he is the happiest of men. He, at least, is lying on roses."

And so he hastily quitted the comte's apartments, and reproaching himself as he went for having talked of nothing but his own affairs to De Guiche, he arrived at D'Artagnan's quarters.

CHAPTER LI.

BRAGELONNE CONTINUES HIS INQUIRY.

THE captain was sitting buried in his leathern armchair, his spurs fixed in the floor, his sword between his legs, and was occupied in reading a great number of letters as he twisted his mustache. D'Artagnan uttered a welcome full of pleasure when he perceived his friend's son.

"Raoul, my boy," he said, "by what lucky accident does it happen that the king has recalled you?"

These words did not sound overagreeably in the young man's ears, who, as he seated himself, replied:

"Upon my word, I cannot tell you; all that I know is that I have come back."

"Hum!" said D'Artagnan, folding up his letters and directing a look full of meaning at him; "what do you say, my boy? that the king has not recalled you, and you have returned? I do not understand that at all."

Raoul was already pale enough, and he began to turn his hat round and round in his hand.

"What the deuce is the matter that you look as you do, and what makes you so dumb?" said the captain. "Do people assume that sort of airs in England? I have been in England, and came back again as lively as a chaffinch. Will you not say something?"

"I have too much to say."

"Ah! ah! how is your father?"

"Forgive me, my dear friend, I was going to ask you that."

D'Artagnan increased the sharpness of his penetrating gaze, which no secret was capable of resisting.

"You are unhappy about something," he said.

"I am, indeed; and you know very well what, Monsieur d'Artagnan."

"I?"

"Of course. Nay, do not pretend to be astonished."

"I am not pretending to be astonished, my friend."

"Dear captain, I know very well that in all trials of finesse, as well as in all trials of strength, I shall be beaten by you. You can see that at the present moment I am an idiot, a perfect fool. I have neither head nor arm; do not despise, but help me. In a few words, I am the most wretched of living beings."

"Oh! oh! why that?" inquired D'Artagnan, unbuckling his belt and softening the ruggedness of his smile.

"Because Mademoiselle de la Valliere is deceiving me."

"She is deceiving you?" said D'Artagnan, not a muscle of whose face had moved. "Those are big words. Who makes use of them?"

"Every one."

"Ah! if every one says so, there must be some truth in it. I begin to believe there is fire when I see the smoke. It is ridiculous, perhaps, but so it is."

"Therefore, you do believe?" exclaimed Bragelonne quickly.

"I never mix myself up in affairs of that kind; you know that very well."

"What! not for a friend, for a son!"

"Exactly. If you were a stranger, I should tell you—I should tell *you* nothing at all. How is Porthos, do you know?"

"Monsieur," cried Raoul, pressing D'Artagnan's hand, "I entreat you, in the name of the friendship you have vowed to my father!"

"The deuce take it! you are really ill—from curiosity."

"No, it is not from curiosity, it is from love."

"Good! Another grand word. If you were really in love, my dear Raoul, you would be very different."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that if you were really so deeply in love that I could believe I was addressing myself to your heart—but it is impossible."

"I tell you I love Louise to distraction."

D'Artagnan could read to the very bottom of the young man's heart.

"Impossible, I tell you," he said. "You are like all young men; you are not in love, you are out of your senses."

"Well, suppose it were only that?"

"No sensible man ever succeeded in making much of a brain when the head was turned. I have completely lost my senses in the same way a hundred times in my life. You would listen to me, but you would not hear me; you would hear, but you would not understand me; you would understand, but you would not obey me."

"Oh! try, try."

"I go far. Even if I were unfortunate enough to know something, and foolish enough to communicate it to you. You are my friend, you say?"

"Indeed, yes."

"Very good. I should quarrel with you. You would never forgive me for having destroyed your illusion, as people say of love affairs."

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, you know all, and yet you plunge me in perplexity and despair, in death itself."

"There, there, now!"

"I never complain, as you know; but as Heaven and my father would never forgive me for blowing out my brains, I will go and get the first person I meet to give me the information which you withhold; I will tell him he lies, and——"

"And you would kill him. And a fine affair that would be. So much the better. What should I care for it. Kill any one you please, my boy, if it can give you any pleasure. It is exactly like a man with the toothache, who keeps on saying, 'Oh! what torture I am suffering. I could bite a piece of iron in half.' My answer always is, 'Bite, my friend, bite; the tooth will remain all the same.' "

"I shall not kill any one, monsieur," said Raoul gloomily.

"Yes, yes; you now assume a different tone; instead of killing, you will get killed yourself, I suppose you mean? Very fine, indeed! How much I should regret you! Of course, I should go about all day, saying, 'Ah! what a fine, stupid fellow that Bragelonne was! as great a stupid as I ever met with. I have passed my whole life almost in teaching him how to hold and use his sword properly, and the silly fellow has got himself spitted like a lark.' Go, then, Raoul, go and get yourself disposed of, if you like. I hardly know who can have taught you logic, but deuce take me if your father has not been regularly robbed of his money by whoever did so."

Raoul buried his face in his hands, murmuring:

"No, no; I have not a single friend in the world!"

"Oh, bah!" said D'Artagnan.

"I meet with nothing but raillery or indifference."

"Idle fancies, monsieur. I do not laugh at you, although I am a Gascon. And, as for being indifferent, if I were so, I should have sent you about your business a quarter of an hour ago, for you would make a man who was out of his senses with delight as dull as possible, and would be the death of one who was only out of spirits. How now, young man, do you wish me to disgust you with the girl you are attached to, and to teach you to execrate the whole sex who constitute the honor and happiness of human life?"

"Oh! tell me, monsieur, and I will bless you."

"Do you think, my dear fellow, that I can have crammed into my brain all about the carpenter, and the painter, and the staircase, and a hundred other similar tales of the same kind?"

"A carpenter! what do you mean?"

"Upon my word, I don't know; some one told me there was a carpenter who made an opening through a certain flooring."

"In La Valliere's room?"

"Oh, I don't know where."

"In the king's apartment, perhaps?"

"Of course, if it were in the king's apartment I should tell you, I suppose."

"In whose room, then?"

"I have told you for the last hour that I know nothing of the whole affair."

"But the painter, then? the portrait——"

"It seems that the king wished to have the portrait of one of the ladies belonging to the court."

"La Valliere's?"

"Why, you seem to have only that name in your mouth. Who spoke to you of La Valliere?"

"If it be not her portrait, then, why do you suppose it would concern me?"

"I do not suppose it will concern you. But you ask me all sorts of questions, and I answer you. You positively will learn all the scandal of the affair, and I tell you—make the best you can of it."

Raoul struck his forehead with his hand, in utter despair.

"It will kill me!" he said.

"So you have said already."

"Yes, you're right;" and he made a step or two, as if he were going to leave.

"Where are you going?"

"To look for some one who will tell me the truth."

"Who is that?"

"A woman."

"Mademoiselle de la Valliere herself, I suppose you mean?" said D'Artagnan, with a smile. "Ah! a famous idea! You wished to be consoled by some one, and you will be so at once. She will tell you nothing ill of herself, of course. So be off."

"You are mistaken, monsieur," replied Raoul; "the woman I mean will tell me all the evil she possibly can."

"You allude to Montalais, I suppose—her friend; a

woman who, on that account, will exaggerate all that is either bad or good in the matter. Do not talk to Montalais, my good fellow."

"You have some reason for wishing me not to talk with Montalais?"

"Well, I admit it. And, in point of fact, why should I play with you as a cat does with a poor mouse? You distress me, you do, indeed. And if I wish you not to speak to Montalais just now, it is because you will be betraying your secret, and people will take advantage of it. Wait, if you can."

"I cannot."

"So much the worse. Why, you see, Raoul, if I had an idea—but I have not got one."

"Promise that you will pity me, my friend, that is all I need, and leave me to get out of the affair by myself."

"Oh, yes, indeed, in order that you may get deeper into the mire! A capital idea, truly! go and sit down at that table, and take a pen in your hand."

"What for?"

"To write and ask Montalais to give you an interview."

"Ah!" said Raoul, snatching eagerly at the pen which the captain held out to him.

Suddenly the door opened, and one of the musketeers, approaching D'Artagnan, said:

"Captain, Mademoiselle de Montalais is here, and wishes to speak to you."

"To me?" murmured D'Artagnan. "Ask her to come in; I shall soon see," he said to himself, "whether she wishes to speak to me or not."

The cunning captain was quite right in his suspicions; for as soon as Montalais entered, she exclaimed:

"Oh, monsieur! monsieur! I beg your pardon, Monsieur d'Artagnan."

"Oh, I forgive you, mademoiselle," said D'Artagnan; "I know that, at my age, those who are looking for me generally need me for something or another."

"I was looking for Monsieur de Bragelonne," replied Montalais.

"How very fortunate that is! he was looking for you, too. Raoul, will you accompany Mademoiselle de Montalais?"

"Oh, certainly!"

"Go along, then," he said, as he gently pushed Roaul out of the cabinet; and, then, taking hold of Montalais' hand, he said, in a low voice, "Be kind toward him; spare him, and spare her, too, if you can."

"Ah!" she said in the same tone of voice, "it is not I who am going to speak to him."

"Who, then?"

"It is madame who has sent for him."

"Very good!" cried D'Artagnan; "it is madame, is it? In an hour's time, then, the poor fellow will be cured."

"Or else dead," said Montalais, in a voice full of compassion. "Adieu, Monsieur d'Artagnan," she said; and she ran to join Raoul, who was waiting for her at a little distance from the door, very much puzzled and uneasy at the dialogue, which promised no good augury for him.

CHAPTER LII.

TWO JEALOUSIES.

LOVERS are very tender toward everything which concerns the person they are in love with. Raoul no sooner found himself alone with Montalais than he kissed her hand with rapture.

"There, there," said the young girl sadly, "you are throwing your kisses away; I will guarantee that they will not bring you back any interest."

"How so? Why? Will you explain to me, my dear Aure?"

"Madame will explain everything to you. I am going to take you to her apartments."

"What!"

"Silence! and throw aside your wild and savage looks. The windows here have eyes, the walls have ears. Have the kindness not to look at me any longer; be good enough to speak to me aloud of the rain, of the fine weather, and of the charms of England."

"At all events—" interrupted Raoul.

"I tell you, I warn you, that wherever it may be, I know not now, madame is sure to have eyes and ear open. I am not very desirous, you can easily believe, to be dismissed or thrown into the Bastile. Let us talk, I tell you, or rather, do not let us talk at all."

Raoul clinched his hands, and tried to assume the look and gait of a man of courage, it is true, but of a man of courage on his way to the torture. Montalais, glancing in every direction, walking along with an easy, swinging gait,

and holding up her head pertly in the air, preceded him to madame's apartments, where he was at once introduced.

"Well," he thought, "this day will pass away without my learning anything. De Guiche showed too much consideration for my feelings; he had, no doubt, come to an understanding with madame, and both of them, by a friendly plot, agreed to postpone the solution of the problem. Why have I not a determined, inveterate enemy?—that serpent, De Wardes, for instance; that he would bite, is very likely; but I should not hesitate any more. To hesitate, to doubt —better by far to die."

The next moment Raoul was in madame's presence. Henriette, more charming than ever, and half lying, half reclining in her armchair, her little feet upon an embroidered velvet cushion; she was playing with a little kitten with long, silky fur, which was biting her fingers and hanging by the lace of her collar.

Madame seemed plunged in deep thought, so deep, indeed, that it required both Montalais' and Raoul's voices to disturb her from her reverie.

"Your highness sent for me?" repeated Raoul.

Madame shook her head, as if she were just awakening, and then said:

"Good-morning, Monsieur de Bragelonne; yes, I sent for you; so you have returned from England?"

"Yes, madame, and am at your royal highness' commands."

"Thank you; leave us, Montalais;" and the latter immediately left the room.

"You have a few minutes to give me, Monsieur de Bragelonne, have you not?"

"My very life is at your royal highness' disposal," Raoul returned, with respect, guessing that there was something serious in all these outward courtesies of madame; nor was he displeased, indeed, to observe the seriousness of her manner, feeling persuaded that there was some sort of affinity between madame's sentiments and his own. In fact, every one at court, of any perception at all, knew perfectly well the capricious fancy and absurd despotism of the princess' singular character. Madame had been flattered beyond all bounds by the king's attentions; she had made herself talked about; she had inspired the queen with that mortal jealousy which is the gnawing worm at the root of every woman's happiness; madame, in a word, in her attempts to cure a wounded pride, had found that her heart

had become deeply and passionately attached. We know what madame had done to recall Raoul, who had been sent out of the way by Louis XIV. Raoul did not know of her letter to Charles II., although D'Artagnan had guessed its contents. Who will undertake to account for that seemingly inexplicable mixture of love and vanity, that passionate tenderness of feeling, that prodigious duplicity of conduct? No one can, indeed; not even the bad angel who kindles the love of coquetry in the heart of woman.

"Monsieur de Bragelonne," said the princess, after a moment's pause, "have you returned satisfied?"

Bragelonne looked at Mme. Henriette, and seeing how pale she was, not alone from what she was keeping back, but also from what she was burning to say, said:

"Satisfied! What is there for me to be satisfied or dissatisfied about, madame?"

"But what are those things with which a man of your age, and of your appearance, is usually either satisfied or dissatisfied?"

"How eager she is!" thought Raoul, almost terrified. "What is it that she is going to breathe into my heart?" and then, frightened at what she might possibly be going to tell him, and wishing to put off the opportunity of having everything explained, which he had hitherto so ardently wished for, yet had dreaded so much, he replied: "I left behind me, madame, a dear friend in good health, and on my return I find him very ill."

"You refer to Monsieur de Guiche," replied Mme. Henriette, with the most imperturbable self-possession; "I have heard he is a very dear friend of yours."

"He is, indeed, madame."

"Well, it is quite true he has been wounded; but he is better now. Oh! Monsieur de Guiche is not to be pitied," she said hurriedly; and then, recovering herself, added; "But has he anything to complain of? Has he complained of anything? is there any cause of grief or sorrow that we are not acquainted with?"

"I allude only to his wound, madame."

"So much the better, then, for, in other respects, Monsieur de Guiche seems to be very happy; he is always in very high spirits. I am sure that you, Monsieur de Bragelonne, would far prefer to be, like him, wounded only in the body—for what, indeed, is such a wound, after all?"

Raoul started.

"Alas! he said to himself, "she is returning to it.

"What did you say?" she inquired.

"I did not say anything, madame."

"You did not say anything; you disapprove of my observation, then? You are perfectly satisfied, I suppose?"

Raoul approached closer to her.

"Madame," he said, "your royal highness wishes to say something to me, and your instinctive kindness and generosity of disposition induces you to be careful and considerate as to your manner of conveying it. Will your royal highness throw this kind forbearance aside? I am able to bear everything, and I am listening."

"Ah!" replied Henriette, "what do you understand, then?"

"That which your royal highness wishes me to understand," said Raoul, trembling, notwithstanding his command over himself, as he pronounced these words.

"In point of fact," murmured the princess, "it seems cruel, but since I have begun——"

"Yes, madame; once your highness has deigned to begin, will you deign to finish——"

Henriette rose hurriedly and walked a few paces up and down her room.

"What did Monsieur de Guiche tell you?" she said suddenly.

"Nothing, madame."

"Nothing! Did he say nothing? Ah! how well I recognize him in that."

"No doubt he wished to spare me."

"And that is what friends call friendship? But surely, Monsieur d'Artagnan, whom you have just left, must have told you?"

"No more than De Guiche, madame."

Henriette made a gesture full of impatience, as she said:

"At least, you know all that the court has known?"

"I know nothing at all, madame."

"Not the scene in the storm?"

"No madame."

"Not the *tête-à-tête* in the forest?"

"No, madame."

"Nor the flight to Chaillot?"

Raoul, whose head drooped like the flower which has been cut down by the sickle, made an almost superhuman effort to smile, as he replied, with the greatest gentleness:

"I have had the honor to tell your royal highness that I am absolutely ignorant of everything, that I am a poor, un-

remembered outcast, who has this moment arrived from England. There have been so many stormy waves between myself and those whom I left behind me here, that the rumor of none of the circumstances your highness refers to has been able to reach me."

Henriette was affected by his extreme pallor, his gentleness, and his great courage. The principal feeling in her heart at that moment was an eager desire to hear the nature of the remembrance which the poor lover retained of her who had made him suffer so much.

"Monsieur de Bragelonne," she said, "that which your friends have refused to do, I will do for you, whom I like and esteem very much. I will be your friend on this occasion. You hold your head high, as a man of honor should do; and I should regret that you should have to bow it down under ridicule, and in a few days, it may be, under contempt."

"Ah!" exclaimed Raoul, perfectly livid. "It is as bad as that, then?"

"If you do not know," said the princess, "I see that you guess; you were affianced, I believe, to Mademoiselle de la Valliere?"

"Yes, madame."

"By that right, then, you deserve to be warned about her, as some day or another I shall be obliged to dismiss Mademoiselle de la Valliere from my service——"

"Dismiss La Valliere?" cried De Bragelonne.

"Of course. Do you suppose that I shall always be accessible to the tears and protestations of the king? No, no; my house shall no longer be made a convenience for such practices; but you tremble, you cannot stand——"

"No, madame, no," said De Bragelonne, making an effort over himself; "I thought I should have died just now, that was all. Your royal highness did me the honor to say that the king wept and implored you——"

"Yes, but in vain," returned the princess, who then related to Raoul the scene that took place at Chaillot, and the king's despair on his return; she told him of his indulgence to herself, and the terrible word with which the outraged princess, the humiliated coquette, had dashed aside the royal anger.

Raoul stood with his head bent down.

"What do you think of it all?" she said.

"The king loves her," he replied.

"But you seem to think she does not love him."

"Alas, madame, I am thinking of the time when she loved me."

Henriette was for a moment struck with admiration at this sublime disbelief: and then, shrugging her shoulders, she said:

"You do not believe me, I see. How deeply you must love her, and you doudt if she loves the king?"

"I do, until I have a proof of it. Forgive me, madame, but she has given me her word; and her mind and heart are too upright to tell a falsehood."

"You require a proof? Be it so. Come with me, then."

CHAPTER LIII.

A DOMICILIARY VISIT.

The princess, preceding Raoul, led him through the courtyard toward that part of the building which La Valliere inhabited, and ascending the same staircase which Raoul himself had ascended that very morning, she paused at the door of the room in which the young man had been so strangely received by Montalais. The opportunity had been well chosen to carry out the project which Mme. Henriette had conceived, for the château was empty. The king, the courtiers, and the ladies of the court, had set off for St. Germain; Mme. Henriette was the only one who knew of De Bragelonne's return, and, thinking over the advantages which might be drawn from this return, had feigned indisposition in order to remain behind. Madame was, therefore, confident of finding La Valliere's room and St. Aignan's apartment perfectly empty. She took a pass-key from her pocket and opened the door of her maid of honor's apartment. De Bragelonne's gaze was immediately fixed upon the interior of the room, which he recognized at once; and the impression which the sight of it produced upon him was one of the first tortures which awaited him. The princess looked at him, and her practiced eye could at once detect what was passing in the young man's heart.

"You asked me for proofs," she said; "do not be astonished, then, if I give you them. But if you do not think you have courage enough to confront them, there is still time to withdraw."

"I thank you, madame," said De Bragelonne; "but I

came here to be convinced. You promised to convince me —do so."

"Enter, then," said madame, "and shut the door behind you."

De Bragelonne obeyed, and then turned toward the princess, whom he interrogated by a look.

"You know where you are, I suppose?"

"Everything leads me to believe I am in Mademoiselle de la Valliere's room."

"You are."

"But I would observe to your highness that this room is a room, and is not a proof."

"Wait," said the princess, as she walked to the foot of the bed, folded up the screen into its several compartments, and stooped down toward the floor. "Look here," she continued: "stoop down and lift up this trapdoor yourself."

"A trapdoor!" said Raoul, astonished; for D'Artagnan's words began to return to his memory, and he had a recollection that D'Artagnan had made use of the same word.

He looked, but uselessly so, for some cleft or crevice which might indicate an opening or a ring to assist in lifting up some portion of the planking.

"Ah, I forgot," said Mme. Henriette, "I forgot the secret spring; the fourth plank of the flooring—press on the spot where you will observe a knot in the wood. Those are the instructions; press, vicomte, press, I say, yourself."

Raoul, pale as death, pressed his finger on the spot which had been indicated to him; at the same moment the spring began to work, and the trap rose of its own accord.

"It is ingenious enough, certainly," said the princess; "and one can see that the architect foresaw that a very little hand only would have to make use of this spring, for see how easily the trapdoor opened without assistance."

"A staircase!" cried Raoul.

"Yes, and a very pretty one, too," said Mme. Henriette. "See, vicomte, the staircase has a balustrade, intended to prevent the falling of timid persons, who might be tempted to descend the staircase; and I will risk myself on it accordingly. Come, vicomte, follow me."

"But before following you, madame, may I ask where this staircase leads to?"

"Ah, true; I forgot to tell you. You know, perhaps, that formerly, Monsieur de St. Aignan lived in the very next apartment to the king?"

"Yes, madame, I am aware of that; that was the arrangement, at least, before I left; and more than once I have had the honor of visiting him in his old rooms."

"Well, he obtained the king's leave to change his former convenient and beautiful apartment for the two rooms to which this staircase will conduct us, and which together form a lodging for him, twice as small, and at a greater distance from the king—a close proximity to whom is by no means disdained, in general, by the gentlemen of the court."

"Very good, madame," returned Raoul; "but go on, I beg, for I do not understand yet."

"Well, then, it accidentally happened," continued the princess, "that Monsieur de St. Aignan's apartment is situated underneath the apartments of my maids of honor, and particularly underneath the room of La Valliere."

"But what was the motive of this trapdoor and this staircase?"

"That I cannot tell you. Would you like us to go down to Monsieur de St. Aignan's rooms? Perhaps we shall be able to find the solution of the enigma there."

And madame set the example by going down herself, while Raoul, sighing deeply, followed her. At every step De Bragelonne took he advanced further into that mysterious apartment which had been witness to La Valliere's sighs, and still retained the sweetest perfume of her presence. De Bragelonne fancied that he perceived, as he inhaled his every breath, that the young girl must have passed through there. Then succeeded to these emanations of herself, which he regarded as invisible though certain proofs, the flowers she preferred to all others—the books of her own selection. Had Raoul preserved a single doubt on the subject, it would have vanished at the secret harmony of tastes, and connection of the mind with the use of the ordinary objects of life. La Valliere, in De Bragelonne's eyes, was present there in every article of furniture, in the color of the hangings, in everything that surrounded him. Dumb, and completely overwhelmed, there was nothing further for him now to learn, and he followed his pitiless conductress as blindly as the culprit follows the executioner; while madame, as cruel as all women of delicate and nervous temperaments are, did not spare him the slightest detail. But it must be admitted that, notwithstanding the kind of apathy into which he had fallen, none of these details, even had he been left alone, would have escaped him. The hap-

piness of the woman who loves, when that happiness is derived from a rival, is a living torture for a jealous man; but for a jealous man such as Raoul was, for one whose heart had for the first time been steeped in gall and bitterness, Louise's happiness was in reality an ignominious death, a death of body and soul. He guessed all; he fancied he could see them, with their hands clasped in each other's, their faces drawn close together, and reflected, side by side, in loving proximity, as they gazed upon the mirrors around them—so sweet an occupation for lovers, who, as they thus see themselves twice over, impress the picture more enduringly in their memories. He could guess, too, the stolen kiss snatched as they separated from each other's loved society. The luxury, the studied elegance, eloquent of the perfection of indolence, of ease; the extreme care shown, either to spare the loved object every annoyance, or to occasion her a delightful surprise; that strength and power of love multiplied by the strength and power of royalty itself, seemed like a deathblow to Raoul. If there be anything which can in any way assuage or mitigate the tortures of jealousy, it is the inferiority of the man who is preferred to yourself; while, on the very contrary, if there be an anguish more bitter than another, a misery for which language has no descriptive words, it is the superiority of the man preferred to yourself, superior, perhaps, in youth, beauty, grace. It is in such moments as these that heaven almost seems to have taken part against the disdained and rejected lover.

One final pang was reserved for poor Raoul. Mme. Henriette lifted up a silk curtain, and behind the canvas he perceived La Valliere's portrait. Not only the portrait of La Valliere, but of La Valliere eloquent of youth, beauty, and happiness, inhaling life and enjoyment at every pore, because at eighteen years of age love itself is life.

"Louise!" murmured De Bragelonne—"Louise! is it true, then? Oh, you have never loved me, for never have you looked at me in that manner."

And he felt as if his heart were crushed within his bosom.

Mme. Henriette looked at him, almost envious of his extreme grief, although she well knew there was nothing to envy in it, and that she herself was as passionately loved by De Guiche as Louise by De Bragelonne. Raoul interpreted Mme. Henriette's look.

"Oh, forgive me, forgive me, madame; in your presence I know I ought to have greater mastery over myself. But

heaven grant that you may never be struck by a similar misery to that which crushes me at this moment, for you are but a woman, and would not be able to endure so terrible an affliction. Forgive me, I again entreat you, madame; I am but a man without rank or position, while you belong to a race whose happiness knows no bounds, whose power acknowledges no limit."

"Monsieur de Bragelonne," replied Henriette, "a heart such as yours merits all the consideration and respect which a queen's heart even can bestow. Regard me as your friend, monsieur; and as such, indeed, I would not allow your whole life to be poisoned by perfidy and covered with ridicule. It was I, indeed, who, with more courage than any of your pretended friends—I, except Monsieur de Guiche—was the cause of your return from London; it is I, also, who have given you these melancholy proofs, necessary, however, for your cure, if you are a lover with courage in his heart, and not a weeping Amadis. Do not thank me; pity me even, and do not serve the king less faithfully than you have done."

Raoul smiled bitterly.

"Ah! true, true; I was forgetting that; the king is my master."

"Your liberty, nay, your very life, is in danger."

A steady, penetrating look informed Mme. Henriette that she was mistaken, and that her last argument was not a likely one to affect the young man.

"Take care, Monsieur de Bragelonne," she said, "for if you do not weigh well all your actions, you might throw into an extravagance of wrath a prince, whose passions once aroused, exceed the utmost limits of reason, and you would thereby involve your friends and family in the deepest distress; you must bend, you must submit, and must cure yourself."

"I thank you, madame; I appreciate the advice your royal highness is good enough to give me, and I will endeavor to follow it; but one final word, I beg."

"Name it."

"Should I be indiscreet in asking you the secret of this staircase, of this trapdoor, a secret which, it seems, you have discovered?"

"Nothing more simple. For the purpose of exercising a surveillance over the young girls who are attached to my service, I have duplicate keys of their doors. It seemed very strange to me that Monsieur de St. Aignan should

change his apartments. It seemed very strange that the king should come to see Monsieur de St. Aignan every day, and, finally, it seemed very strange that so many things should be done during your absence, that the very habits and customs of the court seemed to be changed. I do not wish to be trifled with by the king, nor to serve as a cloak for his love affairs; for, after La Valliere, who weeps incessantly, he will take a fancy to Montalais, who is always laughing; and then to Tonnay-Charente, who does nothing but sing all day; to act such a part as that would be unworthy of me. I have thrust aside the scruples which my friendship for you suggested. I have discovered the secret. I have wounded your feelings, I know; and I again entreat you to excuse me; but I had a duty to fulfill. I have discharged it. You are now forewarned; the tempest will soon burst; protect yourself accordingly."

"You naturally expect, however, that a result of some kind must follow," replied De Bragelonne, with firmness; "for you do not suppose I shall silently accept the shame which is thrust upon me, or the treachery which has been practiced against me?"

"You will take whatever steps in the matter you please, Monsieur Raoul, only do not betray the source whence you derive the truth. That is all I have to ask, that is the only price I require for the service I have rendered you."

"Fear nothing, madame," said De Bragelonne, with a bitter smile.

"I bribed the locksmith in whom the lovers had confided. You can just as well have done so as myself, can you not?"

"Yes, madame. Your royal highness, however, has no other advice or caution to give me, except that of not betraying you?"

"None other."

"I am about, therefore, to beg your royal highness to allow me to remain here for one moment."

"Without me?"

"Oh, no, madame. It matters very little; for what I have to do can be done in your presence. I only ask one moment to write a line to some one."

"It is dangerous, Monsieur de Bragelonne. Take care."

"No one can possibly know that your royal highness has done me the honor to conduct me here. Besides, I shall sign the letter I am going to write."

"Do as you please, then."

Raoul drew out his tablet, and wrote rapidly on one of the leaves the following words:

"Monsieur le Comte: Do not be surprised to find here this paper, signed by me; the friend whom I shall very shortly send to call on you will have the honor to explain the object of my visit to you.

"Vicomte Raoul de Bragelonne."

He rolled up the paper, slipped it into the lock of the door which communicated with the room set apart for the two lovers, and satisfied himself that the paper was so apparent that St. Aignan could not but see it as he entered; he rejoined the princess, who had already reached the top of the staircase. They then separated, Raoul pretending to thank her highness, Henriette pitying, or seeming to pity, with all her heart, the poor, wretched young man she had just condemned to such fearful torture.

"Oh!" she said, as she saw him disappear, pale as death, and his eyes injected with blood, "if I had known this, I should have concealed the truth from that poor gentleman."

CHAPTER LIV.

PORTHOS' PLAN OF ACTION.

The numerous individuals we have introduced into this long story is the cause of each of them being obliged to appear only in his own turn, and according to the exigencies of the recital. The result is, that our readers have had no opportunity of again meeting our friend Porthos since his return from Fontainebleau. The honors which he had received from the king had not changed the easy, affectionate character of that excellent-hearted man; he may, perhaps, have held up his head a little higher than usual, and a majesty of demeanor, as it were, may have betrayed itself since the honor of dining at the king's table had been accorded him. His majesty's banqueting-room had produced a certain effect upon Porthos. Le Seigneur de Bracieux et de Pierrefonds delighted to remember that, during that memorable dinner, the numerous array of servants, and the large number of officials, who were in attendance upon the guests, gave a certain tone and effect to the repast, and seemed to furnish the room. Porthos undertook to confer upon Mouston a position of some kind or other, in order to establish a sort of hierarchy among his other domestics and to create a military household, which was

not unusual among the great captains of the age, since, in the preceding century, this luxury had been greatly encouraged by MM. de Tréville, De Schomberg, De le Vienville, without alluding to M. de Richelieu, M. de Condé, and De Bouillon-Turenne. And, therefore, why should not he, Porthos, the friend of the king and of M. Fouquet, a baron, an engineer, etc., why should not he, indeed, enjoy all the delightful privileges which large possessions and unusual merit invariably confer? Slightly neglected by Aramis, who, we know, was greatly occupied with M. Fouquet; neglected, also, on account of his being on duty, by D'Artagnan; tired of Truchet and Planchet, Porthos was surprised to find himself dreaming, without precisely knowing why; but if any one had said to him, "Do you want anything, Porthos?" he would, most certainly, have replied, "Yes." After one of those dinners, during which Porthos attempted to recall to his recollection all the details of the royal banquet, half-joyful, thanks to the excellence of the wines; half-melancholy, thanks to his ambitious ideas, Porthos was gradually falling off into a gentle doze, when his servant entered to announce that M. de Bragelonne wished to speak to him. Porthos passed into an adjoining room, where he found his young friend in the disposition of mind we are already aware of. Raoul advanced toward Porthos, and shook him by the hand; Porthos, surprised at his seriousness of aspect, offered him a seat.

"Dear Monsieur du Vallon," said Raoul, "I have a service to ask of you."

"Nothing could happen more fortunately, my young friend," replied Porthos; "I have had eight thousand livres sent me this morning from Pierrefonds; and if you want any money——"

"No, I thank you; it is not money."

"So much the worse, then. I have always heard it said that that is the rarest service, but the easiest to render. The remark struck me; I like to cite remarks that strike me."

"Your heart is as good as your mind is sound and true."

"You are too kind, I'm sure. You will dine here, of course?"

"No; I am not hungry."

"Eh! not dine? What a dreadful country England is."

"Not too much so, indeed—but——"

"Well, if such excellent fish and meat were not to be procured there, it would hardly be endurable."

"Yes, I came to——"

"I am listening. Only just allow me to take something to drink. One gets thirsty in Paris;" and he ordered a bottle of champagne to be brought, and, having first filled Raoul's glass, he filled his own, drank it down at a gulp, and then resumed: "I needed that, in order to listen to you with proper attention. I am now quite at your service. What have you to ask me, dear Raoul? What do you want?"

"Give me your opinion upon quarrels in general, my dear friend."

"My opinion! Well, but— Explain your idea a little," replied Porthos, rubbing his forehead.

"I mean—you are generally good-humored, or good-tempered, whenever any misunderstanding may arise between a friend of yours and a stranger, for instance?"

"Oh, in the best of tempers."

"Very good; but what do you do in such a case?"

"Whenever any friend of mine has a quarrel, I always act upon one principle."

"What is that?"

"That all lost time is irreparable, and that one never arranges an affair so well as when everything has been done to imbroil the dispute as much as possible."

"Ah! indeed, that is the principle on which you proceed."

"Thoroughly; so as soon as a quarrel takes place I bring the two parties together."

"Exactly."

"You understand that by this means it is impossible for an affair not to be arranged."

"I should have thought that, treated in this manner, an affair would, on the contrary——"

"Oh! not the least in the world. Just fancy, now, I have had in my life something like a hundred and eighty to a hundred and ninety regular duels, without reckoning hasty encounters, or chance meetings."

"It is a very handsome number," said Raoul, unable to resist a smile.

"A mere nothing; but I am so gentle. D'Artagnan reckons his duels by hundreds. It is very true, he is a little too hard and sharp—I have often told him so."

"And so," resumed Raoul, "you generally arrange the affairs of honor your friends confide to you."

"There is not a single instance in which I have not finished by arranging every one of them," said Porthos, with a gentleness and confidence which surprised Raoul.

"But the way in which you settle them is, at least, honorable, I suppose?"

"Oh! rely upon that; and at this stage, I will explain my other principle to you. As soon as my friend has confided his quarrel to me, this is what I do: I go to his adversary at once, armed with a politeness and self-possession which are absolutely requisite under such circumstances."

"That is the way, then," said Raoul bitterly, "that you arrange the affairs so safely."

"I believe you. I go to the adversary, then, and say to him, 'It is impossible, monsieur, that you are ignorant of the extent to which you have insulted my friend.'"

Raoul frowned at this remark.

"It sometimes happens—very often, indeed," pursued Porthos—"that my friend has not been insulted at all; he has even been the first to give offense; you can imagine, therefore, whether my language is not well chosen."

And Porthos burst into a peal of laughter.

"Decidedly," said Raoul to himself, while the formidable thunder of Porthos' laughter was ringing in his ears, "I am very unfortunate. De Guiche treats me with coldness, D'Artagnan with ridicule, Porthos is too tame; no one will settle this affair in my way. And I came to Porthos because I wished to find a sword instead of cold reasoning at my service. How my ill-luck follows me!"

Porthos, who had recovered himself, continued:

"By a simple expression, I leave my adversary without an excuse."

"That is as it may happen," said Raoul distractedly.

"Not at all; it is quite certain. I have not left him an excuse; and then it is that I display all my courtesy, in order to attain the happy issue of my project. I advance, therefore, with an air of great politeness, and taking my adversary by the hand, I say to him, 'Now that you are convinced of having given the offense, we are sure of reparation; between my friend and yourself, the future can only offer an exchange of mutual courtesies of conduct, and, consequently, my mission is to give you the length of my friend's sword.'"

"What!" said Raoul.

"Wait a minute. 'The length of my friend's sword. My horse is waiting below; my friend is in such and such a spot, and is impatiently awaiting your agreeable society; I will take you with me; we can call upon your second as we go along;' and the affair is arranged."

"And so," said Raoul, pale with vexation, "you reconcile the two adversaries on the ground."

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Porthos. "Reconcile! What for?"

"You said that the affair was arranged."

"Of course, since my friend is waiting for him."

"Well, what then? If he is waiting——"

"Well, if he is waiting, it is merely to stretch his legs a little. The adversary, on the contrary, is stiff from riding; they place themselves in proper order, and my friend kills his opponent, and the affair is ended."

"Ah! he kills him, then?" cried Raoul.

"I should think so," said Porthos. "Is it likely I should ever have as a friend a man who allows himself to get killed? I have a hundred and one friends; at the head of the list stands your father, Aramis, and D'Artagnan, all of whom are living and well, I believe."

"Oh, my dear baron," exclaimed Raoul, as he embraced Porthos.

"You approve of my method, then?" said the giant.

"I approve of it so thoroughly that I shall have recourse to it this very day, without a moment's delay—at once, in fact. You are the very man I have been looking for."

"Good; here I am, then; you want to fight, I suppose?"

"Absolutely so."

"It is very natural. With whom?"

"With Monsieur de St. Aignan."

"I know him—a most agreeable man, who was exceedingly polite to me the day I had the honor of dining with the king. I shall certainly acknowledge his politeness in return, even if it had not happened to be my usual custom. So he has given you offense?"

"A mortal offense."

"The deuce! I can say so, I suppose?"

"More than that, even, if you like."

"That is a very great convenience."

"I may look upon it as one of your arranged affairs, may I not?" said Raoul, smiling.

"As a matter of course. Where will you be waiting for him?"

"Ah! I forgot; it is a very delicate matter. Monsieur de St. Aignan is a very great friend of the king."

"So I have heard it said."

"So that if I kill him——"

"Oh, you will kill him, certainly; you must take every

precaution to do so. But there is no difficulty in these matters now; if you had lived in our early days, oh! that was something like."

"My dear friend, you have not quite understood me. I mean, that Monsieur de St. Aignan being a friend of the king, the affair will be more difficult to manage, since the king might learn beforehand——"

"Oh, no; that is not likely. You know my method: 'Monsieur, you have injured my friend, and——'"

"Yes, I know it."

"And then: 'Monsieur, I have horses below.' I carry him off before he can have spoken to any one."

"Will he allow himself to be carried off like that?"

"I should think so. I should like to see it fail. It would be the first time, if it did. It is true, though, that the young men of the present day— Bah! I would carry him off bodily, if that were all;" and Porthos, adding gesture to speech, lifted Raoul and the chair he was sitting on off the ground, and carried them round the room.

"Very good," said Raoul, laughing. "All we have to do is to state the grounds of the quarrel to Monsieur de St. Aignan."

"Well, but that is done, it seems."

"No, my dear Monsieur du Vallon, the usage of the present day requires that the cause of the quarrel should be explained."

"Very good. Tell me what it is, then."

"The fact is——"

"Deuce take it! see how troublesome this is. In former days we never had any occasion to say anything about the matter. People fought then for the sake of fighting; and I, for one, know no better reason than that."

"You are quite right, Monsieur du Vallon."

"However, tell me what the cause is."

"It is too long a story to tell; only as one must particularize to some extent, and as, on the other hand, the affair is full of difficulties, and requires the most absolute secrecy, you will have the kindness merely to tell Monsieur de St. Aignan that he has, in the first place, insulted me by changing his lodgings."

"By changing his lodgings? Good!" said Porthos, who began to count on his fingers. "Next?"

"Then in getting a trapdoor made in his new apartments."

"I understand," said Porthos; "a trapdoor; upon my

word, this is very serious; you ought to be furious at that. What the deuce does the fellow mean by getting trapdoors made without first consulting you? Trapdoors! *Mordioux!* I haven't got any, except in my dungeons at Bracieux."

"And you will add," said Raoul, "that my last motive for considering myself insulted is, the portrait that Monsieur de St. Aignan well knows."

"Is it possible? A portrait, too! A change of residence, a trapdoor, and a portrait! Why, my dear friend, with but one of those causes of complaint there is enough, and more than enough, for all the gentlemen in France and Spain to cut one another's throats, and that is saying but very little."

"Well, my dear friend, you are furnished with all you need, I suppose?"

"I shall take a second horse with me. Select your own rendezvous, and while you are waiting there, you can practice some of the best passes, so as to get your limbs as elastic as possible."

"Thank you. I shall be waiting for you in the wood of Vincennes, close to Minimes."

"All's right, then. Where am I to find this Monsieur de St. Aignan?"

"At the Palais Royal."

Porthos rang a huge hand-bell.

"My court suit," he said to the servant who answered the summons, "my horse, and a led horse to accompany me."

Then, turning to Raoul, as soon as the servant had quitted the room, he said:

"Does your father know anything about this?"

"No; I am going to write to him."

"And D'Artagnan?"

"No, nor D'Artagnan either. He is very cautious, you know, and might have diverted me from my purpose."

"D'Artagnan is a sound adviser, though," said Porthos, astonished that, in his own loyal faith in D'Artagnan, any one could have thought of himself, so long as there was a D'Artagnan in the world.

"Dear Monsieur du Vallon," said Raoul, "do not question me any more, I implore you. I have told you all that I had to say; it is prompt action that I now expect, as sharp and decided as you know how to arrange it. That, indeed, is my reason for having chosen you."

"You will be satisfied with me," replied Porthos.

"Do not forget, either, that, except ourselves, no one must know anything of this meeting."

"People always find these things out," said Porthos, "when a dead body is discovered in a wood. But I promise you everything, my dear friend, except concealing the dead body. There it is, and it must be seen, as a matter of course. It is a principle of mine not to bury bodies. That has a smack of the assassin about it. Every risk must run its own risk."

"To work, then, my dear friend."

"Rely upon me," said the giant, finishing the bottle, while a servant spread out upon a sofa the gorgeously decorated dress trimmed with lace.

Raoul left the room, saying to himself, with a secret delight, "Perfidious king! traitorous monarch! I cannot reach thee. I do not wish it; for kings are sacred objects. But your friend, your accomplice, your panderer—the coward who represents you—shall pay for your crime. I will kill him in thy name, and afterward we will think of Louise."

CHAPTER LV.

THE CHANGE OF RESIDENCE, THE TRAPDOOR, AND THE PORTRAIT.

Porthos, intrusted, to his great delight, with this mission, which made him feel young again, took half an hour less than his usual time to put on his court suit. To show that he was a man acquainted with the usages of the highest society, he had begun by sending his lackey to inquire if M. de St. Aignan were at home, and received, in answer, that M. le Comte de St. Aignan had had the honor of accompanying the king to St. Germain, as well as the whole court; but that M. le Comte had just that moment returned. Immediately upon this reply, Porthos made as much haste as possible, and reached St. Aignan's apartments just as the latter was having his boots taken off. The promenade had been delightful. The king, who was in love more than ever, and of course happier than ever, behaved in the most charming manner to every one. Nothing could possibly equal his kindness. M. de St. Aignan, it may be remembered, was a poet, and fancied that he had proved that he was so, under too many a memorable cir-

cumstance, to allow the title to be disputed by any one. An indefatigable rhymester, he had, during the whole of the journey, overwhelmed with quatrains, sextains, and madrigals, first the king, and then La Valliere. The king was on his side in a similarly poetical mood, and had made a distich; while La Valliere, like all women who are in love, had composed two sonnets. As one may see, then, the day had not been a bad one for Apollo; and, therefore, as soon as he had returned to Paris, St. Aignan, who knew beforehand that his verses would be sure to be extensively circulated in court circles, occupied himself, with a little more attention than he had been able to bestow during the promenade, with the composition, as well as with the idea itself. Consequently, with all the tenderness of a father about to start his children in life, he candidly interrogated himself whether the public would find these offsprings of his imagination sufficiently elegant and graceful; and so, in order to make his mind easy on the subject, M. de St. Aignan recited to himself the madrigal he had composed, and which he had repeated from memory to the king, and which he had promised to write out for him on his return. All the time he was committing these words to memory, the comte was engaged in undressing himself more completely. He had just taken off his coat, and was putting on his dressing-gown, when he was informed that M. le Baron du Vallon de Bracieux de Pierrefonds was waiting to be received.

"Eh!" he said, "what does that bunch of names mean? I don't know anything about him."

"It is the same gentleman," replied the lackey, "who had the honor of dining with you, monseigneur, at the king's table, when his majesty was staying at Fontainebleau."

"Introduce him, then, at once," cried St. Aignan.

Porthos, in a few minutes, entered the room. M. de St. Aignan had an excellent recollection of persons, and, at the first glance, he recognized the gentleman from the country, who enjoyed so singular a reputation, and whom the king had received so favorably at Fontainebleau, in spite of the smiles of some of those who were present. He, therefore, advanced toward Porthos with all the outward signs of a consideration of manner which Porthos thought but natural, considering that he himself, whenever he called upon an adversary, hoisted the standard of the most refined politeness. St. Aignan desired the servant to give Porthos a chair; and the latter, who saw nothing unusual in this act

of politeness, sat down gravely, and coughed. The ordinary courtesies having been exchanged between the two gentlemen, the comte, to whom the visit was paid, said:

"May I ask, Monsieur le Baron, to what happy circumstance I am indebted for the favor of a visit from you?"

"The very thing I am about to have the honor of explaining to you, Monsieur le Comte; but, I beg your pardon——"

"What is the matter, monsieur?" inquired St. Aignan.

"I regret to say that I have broken your chair."

"Not at all, monsieur," said St. Aignan, "not at all."

"It is the fact, though, Monsieur le Comte; I have broken it—so much so, indeed, that if I do not move, I shall fall down, which would be an exceedingly disagreeable position for me in the discharge of the very serious mission which has been intrusted to me with regard to yourself."

Porthos rose, and but just in time, for the chair had given way several inches. St. Aignan looked about him for something more solid for his guest to sit upon.

"Modern articles of furniture," said Porthos, while the comte was looking about, "are constructed in a ridiculously light manner. In my early days, when I used to sit down with far more energy than is now the case, I do not remember ever to have broken a chair, except in taverns, with my arms."

St. Aignan smiled at this remark.

"But," said Porthos, as he settled himself down in a couch, which creaked, but did not give way beneath his weight, "that, unfortunately, has nothing whatever to do with my present visit."

"Why unfortunately? Are you the bearer of a message of ill-omen, Monsieur le Baron?"

"Of ill-omen—for a gentleman? Certainly not, Monsieur le Comte," replied Porthos nobly. "I have simply come to say that you have seriously insulted a friend of mine."

"I! monsieur?" exclaimed St. Aignan—"I have insulted a friend of yours, do you say? May I ask his name?"

"Monsieur Raoul de Bragelonne."

"I have insulted Monsieur Raoul de Bragelonne!" cried St. Aignan. "I really assure you, monsieur, that it is quite impossible; for Monsieur de Bragelonne, whom I know but very slightly—nay, whom I know hardly at all—is in England, and, as I have not seen him for a long time past, I cannot possibly have insulted him."

"Monsieur de Bragelonne is in Paris, Monsieur le Comte," said Porthos, perfectly unmoved; "and I repeat, it is quite

certain you have insulted him, since he himself told me you had. Yes, monsieur, you have seriously insulted him, mortally insulted him, I repeat."

"It is impossible, Monsieur le Baron, I swear, quite impossible."

"Besides," added Porthos, "you cannot be ignorant of the circumstance, since Monsieur de Bragelonne informed me that he had already apprised you of it by a note."

"I give you my word of honor, monsieur, that I have received no note whatever."

"This is most extraordinary," replied Porthos.

"I will convince you," said St. Aignan, "that I have received nothing in any way from him." And he rang the bell. "Basque," he said to the servant who entered, "how many letters or notes were sent here during my absence?"

"Three, Monsieur le Comte—a note from Monsieur de Fiesque, one from Madame de Laferte, and a letter from Monsieur de la Fuentes."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Comte."

"Speak the truth before this gentleman—the truth, you understand. I will take care you are not blamed."

"There was a note, also, from—from——"

"Well, from whom?"

"From Mademoiselle de la Val——"

"That is quite sufficient," interrupted Porthos. "I believe you, Monsieur le Comte."

St. Aignan dismissed the valet, and followed him to the door, in order to close it after him; and when he had done so, looking straight before him, he happened to see in the keyhole of the adjoining apartment the paper which De Bragelonne had slipped in there as he left.

"What is this?" he said.

Porthos who was sitting with his back to the room, turned round.

"Oh! oh!" he said.

"A note in the keyhole!" exclaimed St. Aignan.

"That is not unlikely to be the one we want, Monsieur le Comte," said Porthos.

St. Aignan took out the paper.

"A note from Monsieur de Bragelonne!" he exclaimed.

"You see, monsieur, I was right. Oh, when I say a thing——"

"Brought here by Monsieur de Bragelonne himself," the comte murmured, turning pale. "This is infamous! How could he possible have come here?"

And the comte rang again.

"Who has been here during my absence with the king?"

"No one, monsieur."

"That is impossible. Some one must have been here."

"No one could possibly have entered, monsieur; since I kept the keys in my own pocket."

"And yet I find this letter in that lock yonder; some one must have put it there; it could not have come alone."

Basque opened his arms, as if signifying the most absolute ignorance on the subject.

"Probably it was Monsieur de Bragelonne himself who placed it there," said Porthos.

"In that case he must have entered here."

"How could that have been, since I have the keys in my own pocket?" returned Basque perseveringly.

St. Aignan crumpled up the letter in his hand, after having read it.

"There is something mysterious about this," he murmured, absorbed in thought. Porthos left him to his reflections; but after awhile returned to the mission he had undertaken.

"Shall we return to our little affair?" he said, addressing St. Aignan, as soon as the lackey had disappeared.

"I think I can now understand it, from this note, which has arrived here in so singular a manner. Monsieur de Bragelonne says that a friend will call."

"I am his friend, and am the one he alludes to."

"For the purpose of giving me a challenge?"

"Precisely."

"And he complains that I have insulted him?"

"Mortally so."

"In what way, may I ask? for his conduct is so mysterious, that it, at least, needs some explanation."

"Monsieur," replied Porthos, "my friend cannot but be right and, as far as his conduct is concerned, if it be mysterious, as you say, you have only yourself to blame for it."

Porthos pronounced these words with an amount of confidence which, for a man who was unaccustomed to his ways, must have revealed an infinity of sense.

"Mystery, be it so; but what is the mystery about?" said St. Aignan.

"You will think it best, perhaps," Porthos replied with a low bow, "that I do not enter into particulars."

"Oh, I perfectly understand. We will touch very lightly upon it, then, so speak, monsieur; I am listening."

"In the first place, monsieur," said Porthos, "you have changed your apartments."

"Yes, that is quite true," said St. Aignan.

"You admit it," said Porthos, with an air of satisfaction.

"Admit it! of course I admit it. Why should I not admit it, do you suppose?"

"You have admitted it. Very good," said Porthos, lifting up one finger.

"But how can my having moved my lodgings have done Monsieur de Bragelonne any harm? Have the goodness to tell me that, for I positively do not comprehend a word of what you are saying."

Porthos stopped him, and then said, with great gravity:

"Monsieur, this is the first of Monsieur de Bragelonne's complaints against you. If he makes a complaint, it is because he feels himself insulted."

St. Aignan began to beat his foot impatiently on the ground.

"This looks like a bad quarrel," he said.

"No one can possibly have a bad quarrel with the Vicomte de Bragelonne," returned Porthos; "but, at all events, you have nothing to add on the subject of your changing your apartments, I suppose?"

"Nothing. And what is the next point?"

"Ah, the next! You will observe, monsieur, that the one I have already mentioned is a most serious injury, to which you have given no answer, or, rather, have answered very indifferently. Is it possible, monsieur, that you have changed your lodgings? Monsieur de Bragelonne feels insulted at your having done so, and you do not attempt to excuse yourself."

"What!" cried St. Aignan, who was getting annoyed at the perfect coolness of his visitor—"what! am I to consult Monsieur de Bragelonne whether I am to move or not? You can hardly be serious, monsieur."

"Absolutely serious, monsieur; but, under any circumstances, you will admit that it is nothing in comparison with the second ground of complaint."

"Well, what is that?"

Porthos assumed a very serious expression, as he said:

"How about the trapdoor, monsieur?"

St. Aignan turned exceedingly pale. He pushed back his chair so abruptly that Porthos, simple as he was, perceived that the blow had told.

"The trapdoor!" murmured St. Aignan.

"Yes, monsieur; explain that, if you can," said Porthos, shaking his head.

St. Aignan held down his head, as he murmured:

"I have been betrayed; everything is known!"

"Everything," replied Porthos, who knew nothing.

"You see me perfectly overwhelmed," pursued St. Aignan, "overwhelmed to a degree that I hardly know what I am about."

"A guilty conscience, monsieur. Your affair is a bad one, and when the public shall learn all about it, and will judge——"

"Oh, monsieur!" exclaimed the comte hurriedly, "such a secret ought not to be known, even by one's confessor."

"That we will think about," said Porthos; "the secret will not go far, in fact."

"Surely, monsieur," returned St. Aignan, "since Monsieur de Bragelonne has penetrated the secret, he must be aware of the danger he as well as others run the risk of incurring."

"Monsieur de Bragelonne runs no danger, monsieur, nor does he fear any either, as you, if it please Heaven, will find out very soon."

"This fellow is a perfect madman," thought St. Aignan. "What, in Heaven's name, does he want?"

He then said, aloud:

"Come, monsieur, let us hush up this affair."

"You forget the portrait," said Porthos, in a voice of thunder, which made the comte's blood freeze in his veins.

As the portrait in question was La Valliere's portrait, and as no mistake could any longer exist on the subject, St. Aignan's eyes were completely opened.

"Ah!" he exclaimed—"ah! monsieur, I remember now that Monsieur de Bragelonne was engaged to be married to her."

Porthos assumed an imposing air, all the majesty of ignorance, in fact, as he said:

"It matters nothing whatever to me, nor to yourself, indeed, whether or not my friend was, as you say, engaged to be married. I am even astonished that you should have made use of so indiscreet a remark. It may possibly do your cause harm, monsieur."

"Monsieur," replied St. Aignan, "you are the incarnation of intelligence, delicacy, and loyalty of feeling united. I see the whole matter now clearly enough."

"So much the better," said Porthos.

"And," pursued St. Aignan, "you have made me comprehend it in the most ingenious and the most delicate manner possible. I beg you to accept my best thanks."

Porthos drew himself up, unable to resist the flattery of the remark.

"Only, now that I know everything, permit me to explain——"

Porthos shook his head as a man who does not wish to hear, but St. Aignan continued:

"I am in despair, I assure you, at all that has happened; but how would you have acted in my place? Come, between ourselves, tell me what would you have done?"

Porthos drew himself up, as he answered:

"There is no question at all of what I should have done, young man; you have now been made acquainted with the three causes of complaint against you, I believe?"

"As for the first, my change of rooms; and I now address myself to you, as a man of honor and of great intelligence, could I, when the desire of so august a personage was so urgently expressed that I should move, ought I to have disobeyed?"

Porthos was about to speak, but St. Aignan did not give him time to answer.

"Ah! my frankness, I see, convinces you," he said, interpreting the movement according to his own fancy. "You feel that I am right."

Porthos did not reply, and so St. Aignan continued:

"I pass by that unfortunate trap-door," he said, placing his hand on Porthos' arm, "that trapdoor, the occasion and the means of so much unhappiness, and which was constructed for—you know what. Well, then, in plain truth, do you suppose that it was I who, of my own accord, in such a place too, had that trapdoor made? Oh, no! you do not believe it; and here again you feel, you guess, you understand the influence of a will superior to my own. You can conceive the infatuation, the blind, irresistible passion which has been at work. But, thank Heaven! I am fortunate enough in speaking to a man who has so much sensitiveness of feeling; if it were not so, indeed, what an amount of misery and scandal would fall upon her, poor girl! and upon him—who I will not name."

Porthos, confused and bewildered by the eloquence and gestures of St. Aignan, made a thousand efforts to stem this torrent of words, of which, by the bye, he did not understand a single one; he remained upright and motionless on

his seat, and that was all he could do. St. Aignan continued, and gave a new inflection to his voice, and an increasing vehemence to his gesture:

"As for the portrait, for I readily believe the portrait is the principal cause of complaint, tell me candidly if you think me to blame? Who was it who wished to have her portrait? Was it I? Who is in love with her? Is it I? Who wishes to gain her affection? Again, is it I? Who took her likeness? I, do you think? No! a thousand times, no! I know Monsieur de Bragelonne must be in a state of despair; I know these misfortunes are most cruel. But I, too, am suffering as well; and yet there is no possibility of offering any resistance. Suppose we were to struggle? we would be laughed at. If he obstinately persists in his course, he is lost. You will tell me, I know, that despair is ridiculous, but then you are a sensible man. You have understood me. I perceive by your serious, thoughtful, embarrassed air, even, that the importance of the situation we are placed in has not escaped you. Return, therefore, to Monsieur de Bragelonne; thank him—as I have indeed reason to thank him—for having chosen as an intermediary a man of your high merit. Believe me that I shall, on my side, preserve an eternal gratitude for the man who has so ingeniously, so cleverly arranged the misunderstanding between us. And since ill-luck would have it that the secret should be known to four instead of to three, why, this sceret, which might make the most ambitious man's fortune, I am delighted to share with you, monsieur, from the bottom of my heart I am delighted at it. From this very moment you can make use of me as you please, I place myself entirely at your mercy. What can I possibly do for you? What can I solicit, nay, require. even? You have only to speak, monsieur, only to speak."

And, according to the familiarly friendly fashion of that period, St. Aignan threw his arms round Porthos, and clasped him tenderly in his embrace. Porthos allowed him to do this with the most perfect indifference.

"Speak," resumed St. Aignan, "what do you require?"

"Monsieur," said Porthos, "I have a horse below; be good enough to mount him; he is a very good one, and will play you no tricks."

"Mount on horseback! what for?" inquired St. Aignan, with no little curiosity.

"To accompany me where Monsieur de Bragelonne is awaiting us."

"Ah! he wishes to speak to me, I suppose? I can well believe that; he wishes to have the details, very likely; alas! it is a very delicate matter; but at the present moment I cannot, for the king is waiting for me."

"The king must wait, then," said Porthos.

"What do you say? the king must wait!" interrupted the finished courtier, with a smile of utter amazement, for he could not understand that the king could under any circumstances be supposed to have to wait.

"It is merely the affair of a very short hour," returned Porthos.

"But where is Monsieur de Bragelonne waiting for me?"

"At the Minimes, at Vincennes."

"Ah, indeed! but are we going to laugh over the affair when we get there?"

"I don't think it likely," said Porthos, as his face assumed a stern hardness of expression.

"But the Minimes is a rendezvous where duels take place, and what can I have to do at the Minimes?"

Porthos slowly drew his sword, and said:

"That is the length of my friend's sword."

"Why, the man is mad!" cried St. Aignan.

The color mounted to Porthos' face, as he replied:

"If I had not the honor of being in your own apartment, monsieur, and of representing Monsieur de Bragelonne's interests, I would throw you out of the window. It will be merely a pleasure postponed, and you will lose nothing by waiting. Will you come with me to the Minimes, monsieur, of your own free will?"

"But——"

"Take care, I will carry you if you do not come quietly."

"Basque!" cried St. Aignan.

As soon as Basque appeared, he said:

"The king wishes to see Monsieur le Comte."

"That is very different," said Porthos; "the king's service before everything else. We will wait until this evening, monsieur."

And saluting St. Aignan with his usual courtesy, Porthos left the room, delighted at having arranged another affair. St. Aignan looked after him as he left; and then hastily putting on his coat again, he ran off, arranging his dress as he went along, muttering to himself:

"The Minimes! the Minimes! We will see how the king will like this challenge; for it is for him after all, that is certain."

CHAPTER LVI.

RIVAL POLITICS.

On his return from the promenade, which had been so prolific in poetical effusions, and in which every one had paid his or her tribute to the Muses, as the poets of the period used to say, the king found M. Fouquet waiting for an audience. M. Colbert had laid in wait for his majesty in the corridor, and followed him like a jealous and watchful shadow; M. Colbert, with his square head, his vulgar and untidy, though rich costume, somewhat resembled a Flemish gentleman after he had been overindulging in his national drink—beer. Fouquet, at the sight of his enemy, remained perfectly unmoved, and during the whole of the scene which followed scrupulously resolved to observe that line of conduct which is so difficult to be carried out by a man of superior mind, who does not even wish to show his contempt, from the fear of doing his adversary too much honor. Colbert made no attempt to conceal the insulting expression of the joy he felt. In his opinion, M. Fouquet's was a game very badly played and hopelessly lost, although not yet finished. Colbert belonged to that school of politicians who think cleverness alone worthy of their admiration, and success the only thing worth caring for. Colbert, moreover, who was not simply an envious and jealous man, but who had the king's interest really at heart, because he was thoroughly imbued with the highest sense of probity in all matters of figures and accounts, could well afford to assign as a pretext for his conduct that, in hating and doing his utmost to ruin M. Fouquet, he had nothing in view but the welfare of the state and the dignity of the crown. None of these details escaped Fouquet's observation, through his enemy's thick, bushy brows, and despite the restless movement of his eyelids, he could, by merely looking at his eyes, penetrate to the very bottom of Colbert's heart, and he read to what an unbounded extent hate toward himself and triumph at his approaching fall existed there. But as, in observing everything, he wished to remain himself impenetrable, he composed his features, smiled with that charmingly sympathetic smile which was peculiarly his own, and saluted the king with the most dignified and graceful ease and elasticity of manner.

"Sire," he said, "I perceive by your majesty's joyous air that you have been gratified with the promenade."

"Most gratified, indeed, Monsieur le Surintendant, most gratified. You were very wrong not to come with us, as I invited you to do."

"I was working, sire," replied the surintendant, who did not even seem to take the trouble to turn aside his head even in the merest recognition of Colbert's presence.

"Ah! Monsieur Fouquet," cried the king, "there is nothing like the country. I should be very delighted to live in the country always, in the open air and under the trees."

"I should hope that your majesty is not yet weary of the throne," said Fouquet.

"No; but thrones of soft turf are very delightful."

"Your majesty gratifies my utmost wishes in speaking in that manner, for I have a request to submit to you."

"On whose behalf, monsieur?"

"On behalf of the nymphs of Vaux, sire."

"Ah, ah!" said Louis XIV.

"Your majesty, too, once deigned to make me a promise," said Fouquet.

"Yes, I remember it."

"The *fête* at Vaux, the celebrated *fête*, I think it was, sire," said Colbert, endeavoring to show his importance by taking part in the conversation.

Fouquet, with the profoundest contempt, did not take the slightest notice of the remark, as if, as far as he was concerned, Colbert had not even thought or said a word.

"Your majesty is aware," he said, "that I destine my estate at Vaux to receive the most amiable of princes, the most powerful of monarchs."

"I have given you my promise, monsieur," said Louis XIV., smiling; "and a king never departs from his word."

"And I have come now, sire, to inform your majesty that I am ready to obey your orders in every respect."

"Do you promise me many wonders, Monsieur le Surintendant?" said Louis, looking at Colbert.

"Wonders? Oh! no, sire. I do not undertake that; I hope to be able to procure your majesty a little pleasure, perhaps even a little forgetfulness of the cares of state."

"Nay, nay, Monsieur Fouquet," returned the king; "I insist upon the word 'wonders.' You are a magician, I believe; we all know the power you wield; we also know that you can find gold even when there is none to be found elsewhere; so much so, indeed, that the people say you coin it."

Fouquet felt that the shot was discharged from a double quiver, and that the king had launched an arrow from his own bow as well as one from Colbert's.

"Oh!" said he laughingly, "the people know perfectly well out of what mine I procure the gold; and they know it only too well, perhaps; besides," he added, "I can assure your majesty that the gold destined to pay the expenses of the *fête* at Vaux will cost neither blood nor tears; hard labor it may, perhaps, but that can be paid for."

Louis paused, quite confused. He wished to look at Colbert; Colbert, too, wished to reply to him; a glance as swift as an eagle's, a proud, loyal, king-like glance, indeed, which Fouquet darted at the latter, arrested the words upon his lips. The king, who had by this time recovered his self-possession, turned toward Fouquet, saying:

"I presume, therefore, I am now to consider myself formally invited?"

"Yes, sire; if your majesty will condescend so far as to accept my invitation."

"What day have you fixed?"

"Any day your majesty may find most convenient."

"You speak like an enchanter who has but to conjure up the wildest fancies, Monsieur Fouquet. I could not say so much, indeed."

"Your majesty will do, whenever you please, everything that a monarch can and ought to do. The King of France has servants at his bidding who are able to do anything on his behalf, to accomplish everything to gratify his pleasures."

Colbert tried to look at the surintendant, in order to see whether this remark was an approach to less hostile sentiments on his part; but Fouquet had not even looked at his enemy, and Colbert hardly seemed to exist as far as he was concerned.

"Very good, then," said the king. "Will a week hence suit you?"

"Perfectly well, sire."

"This is Tuesday; if I give you until next Sunday week, will that be sufficient?"

"The delay which your majesty deigns to accord me will greatly aid the various works which my architects have in hand for the purpose of adding to the amusement of your majesty and your friends."

"By the bye, speaking of my friends," resumed the king; "how do you intend to treat them?"

"The king is master everywhere, sire; your majesty will draw up your own list and give your own orders. All those you may deign to invite will be my guests, my honored guests, indeed."

"I thank you," returned the king, touched by the noble thought expressed in so noble a tone.

Fouquet, therefore, took leave of Louis XIV., and after a few words had been added with regard to the details of certain matters of business. He felt that Colbert would remain behind with the king, that they would both converse about him, and that neither of them would spare him in the least degree. The satisfaction of being able to give a last and terrible blow to his enemy seemed to him almost like a compensation for everything they were about to subject him to. He turned back again immediately, as soon indeed as he had reached the door, and addressing the king, said:

"I was forgetting that I had to crave your majesty's forgiveness."

"In what respect?" said the king graciously.

"For having committed a serious fault without perceiving it."

"A fault! You! Ah! Monsieur Fouquet, I shall be unable to do otherwise than forgive you. In what way or against whom have you been found wanting?"

"Against every sense of propriety, sire. I forgot to inform your majesty of a circumstance that has lately occurred of some little importance."

"What is it?"

Colbert trembled; he fancied that he was about to frame a denunciation against him. His conduct had been unmasked. A single syllable from Fouquet, a single proof formally advanced, and before the youthful loyalty of feeling which guided Louis XIV., Colbert's favor would disappear at once; the latter trembled, therefore, lest so daring a blow might not overthrow his whole scaffold; in point of fact, the opportunity was so admirably suited to be taken advantage of, that a skillful, practiced player like Aramis would not have let it slip.

"Sire," said Fouquet, with an easy, unconcerned air, "since you have had the kindness to forgive me, I am perfectly indifferent about my confession; this morning I sold one of the official appointments I hold."

"One of your appointments," said the king, "which?"

Colbert turned perfectly livid.

"That which conferred upon me, sire, a grand gown and stern air of gravity—the appointment of procureur-général."

The king involuntarily uttered a loud exclamation and looked at Colbert, who, with his face bedewed with perspiration, felt almost on the point of fainting.

"To whom have you sold this department, Monsieur Fouquet?" inquired the king.

Colbert was obliged to lean against the side of the fireplace.

"To a counselor belonging to the parliament, sire, whose name is Vanel."

"Vanel?"

"Yes, sire; a friend of the intendant Colbert," added Fouquet, letting every word fall from his lips with the most inimitable nonchalance, and with an admirably assumed expression of forgetfulness and ignorance. And having finished, and having overwhelmed Colbert beneath the weight of this superiority, the surintendant again saluted the king and quitted the room, partially revenged by the stupefaction of the king and the humiliation of the favorite.

"Is it really possible," said the king, as soon as Fouquet had disappeared, "that he has sold that office?"

"Yes, sire," said Colbert meaningly.

"He must be mad," the king added.

Colbert this time did not reply; he had penetrated the king's thought, a thought which amply revenged him for the humiliation he had just been made to suffer; his hatred was augmented by a feeling of bitter jealousy of Fouquet; and a threat of disgrace was now added to the plan he had arranged for his ruin. Colbert felt perfectly assured that for the future, between Louis XIV. and himself, their hostile feelings and ideas would meet with no obstacles, and that at the first fault committed by Fouquet, which could be laid hold of as a pretext, the chastisement impending over him would be precipitated. Fouquet had thrown aside his weapons of defense, and hate and jealousy had picked them up. Colbert was invited by the king to the *fête* at Vaux; he bowed like a man confident in himself, and accepted the invitation with the air of one who almost confers a favor. The king was about writing down St. Aignan's name on his list of royal commands, when the usher announced the Comte de St. Aignan; as soon as the royal "Mercury" entered, Colbert discreetly withdrew.

CHAPTER LVII.

RIVAL AFFECTIONS.

St. Aignan had quitted Louis XIV. hardly a couple of hours before; but in the first effervescence of his affection, whenever Louis XIV. did not see La Valliere, he was obliged to talk of her. Besides, the only person with whom he could speak about her at his ease was St. Aignan, and St. Aignan had, therefore, become indispensable to him.

"Ah! is that you, comte?" he exclaimed, as soon as he perceived him, doubly delighted, not only to see him again, but also to get rid of Colbert, whose scowling face always put him out of humor.

"So much the better; I am very glad to see you; you will make one of the traveling-party, I suppose?"

"Of what traveling-party are you speaking, sire?" inquired St. Aignan.

"The one we are making up to go to the *fête* the surintendant is about to give at Vaux. Ah! St. Aignan, you will, at last, see a *fête*, a royal *fête*, by the side of which all our amusements at Fontainebleau are petty, contemptible affairs."

"At Vaux! the surintendant going to give a *fête* in your majesty's honor? Nothing more than that?"

"'Nothing more than that,' do you say? It is very diverting to find you treating it with so much disdain. Are you, who express such an indifference on the subject, aware that as soon as it is known that Monsieur Fouquet is going to receive me at Vaux next Sunday week, people will be striving their very utmost to get invited to the *fête?* I repeat, St. Aignan, you shall be one of the invited guests."

"Very well, sire; unless I shall, in the meantime, have undertaken a longer and a less agreeable journey."

"What journey do you allude to?"

"The one across the Styx, sire."

"Bah!" said Louis XIV., laughing.

"No, seriously, sire," replied St. Aignan, "I am invited there; and in such a way, in truth, that I hardly know what to say, or how to act, in order to refuse it."

"I do not understand you. I know that you are in a poetical vein; but try not to sink from Apollo to Phœbus."

"Very well; if your majesty will deign to listen to me, I will not put your mind on the rack any longer."

"Speak!"

"Your majesty knows the Baron du Vallon?"

"Yes, indeed; a good servant to my father, the late king, and an admirable companion at table; for, I think, you are referring to the one who dined with us at Fontainebleau?"

"Precisely so; but you have omitted to add to his other qualifications, sire, that he is a most charming killer of other people."

"What! does Monsieur du Vallon wish to kill you?"

"Or to get me killed, which is the same thing."

"The deuce!"

"Do not laugh, sire, for I am not saying a word that is not the exact truth."

"And you say he wishes to get you killed?"

"That is that excellent person's present idea."

"Be easy; I will defend you, if he be in the wrong."

"Ah! there is an 'if!' "

"Of course; answer me as candidly as if it were some one else's affair, instead of your own, my poor St. Aignan; is he right or wrong?"

"Your majesty shall be the judge."

"What have you done to him?"

"To him, personally, nothing at all; but, it seems, I have to one of his friends."

"It is all the same. Is his friend one of the celebrated 'four?' "

"No. It is the son of one of the celebrated 'four,' instead."

"What have you done to the son? Come, tell me."

"Why, it seems I have helped some one to take his mistress from him."

"You confess it, then?"

"I cannot help confessing it, for it is true."

"In that case, you are wrong; and if he were to kill you, he would be acting perfectly right."

"Ah! that is your majesty's way of reasoning, then?"

"Do you think it a bad way?"

"It is a very expeditious way, at all events."

" 'Good justice is prompt;' so my grandfather, Henry IV., used to say."

"In that case, your majesty will, perhaps, be good enough to sign my adversary's pardon, for he is now waiting for me at the Minimes, for the purpose of putting me out of my misery."

"His name, and a parchment."

"There is a parchment upon your majesty's table; and as for his name——"

"Well, what is it?"

"The Vicomte de Bragelonne, sire."

"'The Vicomte de Bragelonne!'" exclaimed the king, changing from a fit of laughter to the most profound stupor; and then, after a moment's silence, while he wiped his forehead, which was bedewed with perspiration, he again murmured: "De Bragelonne!"

"No other than he, sire."

"De Bragelonne, who was affianced to——"

"Yes, sire."

"He was in London, however."

"Yes; but I can assure you, sire, he is there no longer."

"Is he is Paris, then?"

"He is at the Minimes, sire, where he is waiting for me, as I have already had the honor of telling you."

"Does he know all?"

"Yes; and many things besides. Perhaps your majesty would like to look at the letter I have received from him;" and St. Aignan drew from his pocket the note which we are already acquainted with. "When your majesty has read the letter, I will tell you how it reached me."

The king read it in great agitation, and immediately said:

"Well?"

"Well, sire, your majesty knows a certain carved lock, closing a certain door of ebony-wood, which separates a certain apartment from a certain blue and white sanctuary?"

"Of course; Louise's boudoir."

"Yes, sire. Well, it was in the keyhole of that lock that I found that note."

"Who placed it there?"

"Either Monsieur de Bragelonne, or the devil himself; but inasmuch as the note smells of amber and not of sulphur, I conclude that it must be, not the devil, but Monsieur de Bragelonne."

Louis bent down his head, and seemed absorbed in sad and melancholy reflections. Perhaps something like remorse was at that moment passing through his heart.

"The secret is discovered," he said.

"Sire, I shall do my utmost that the secret dies in the breast of the man who possesses it?" said St. Aignan, in a tone of bravado, as he moved toward the door; but a gesture of the king made him pause.

"Where are you going?" he inquired.

"Where I am waited for, sire."

"What for?"

"To fight, in all probability."

"You fight!" exclaimed the king. "One moment, if you please, Monsieur le Comte!"

St. Aignan shook his head, as a rebellious child does, whenever any one interferes to prevent him throwing himself into a well, or playing with a knife.

"But yet, sire," he said.

"In the first place," continued the king, "I require to be enlightened a little."

"Upon that point, if your majesty will be pleased to interrogate me," replied St. Aignan, "I will throw what light I can."

"Who told you that Monsieur de Bragelonne had penetrated into that room?"

"The letter which I found in the keyhole told me so."

"Who told you that it was De Bragelonne who put it there?"

"Who but himself would have dared to undertake such a mission?"

"You are right. How was he able to get into your rooms?"

"Ah! that is very serious, inasmuch as all the doors were closed, and my lackey, Basque, had the keys in his pocket."

"Your lackey must have been bribed."

"Impossible, sire; for, if he had been bribed, those who did so would not have sacrificed the poor fellow, whom, it is not unlikely, they might want to turn to further use by and by, in showing so clearly that it was he whom they had made use of."

"Quite true. And now I can only form one conjecture."

"Tell me what it is, sire, and we shall see if it is the same that has presented itself to my mind."

"That he effected an entrance by means of the staircase."

"Alas! sire, that seems to me more than probable."

"There is no doubt that some one must have sold the secret of the trapdoor."

"Either sold it or given it."

"Why do you make that distinction?"

"Because there are certain persons, sire, who, being above the price of a treason, give, and do not sell."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, sire! your majesty's mind is too clear-sighted not to guess what I mean, and you will save me the embarrassment of naming the person I allude to."

"You are right; you mean madame. I suppose her suspicions were aroused by your changing your lodgings."

"Madame has keys of the apartments of her maids of honor, and she is powerful enough to discover what no one but yourself could do, or she would not be able to discover anything."

"And you suppose, then, that my sister must have entered into an alliance with De Bragelonne, and has informed him of all the details of the affair?"

"Perhaps even better still, for she perhaps accompanied him there."

"Which way? through your own apartments?"

"You think it impossible, sire? Well, listen to me. Your majesty knows that madame is very fond of perfumes?"

"Yes; she acquired that taste from my mother."

"Vervain, particularly."

"Yes; it is the scent she prefers to all others."

"Very good, sire; my apartments happen to smell very strongly of vervain."

The king remained silent and thoughtful for a few moments, and then resumed:

"But why should madame take De Bragelonne's part against me?"

St. Aignan could very easily have replied, "A woman's jealousy." The king probed his friend to the bottom of his heart to ascertain if he had learned the secret of his flirtation with his sister-in-law. But St. Aignan was not an ordinary courtier; he did not lightly run the risk of finding out family secrets; and he was too good a friend of the Muses not to think very frequently of poor Ovidius Naso, whose eyes shed so many tears in expiation of his crime for having once beheld something, one hardly knows what, in the palace of Augustus. He, therefore, passed by madame's secret very skillfully. But as he had shown no ordinary sagacity in indicating madame's presence in his rooms in company with De Bragelonne, it was necessary, of course, for him to repay with interest the king's *amour propre*, and reply plainly to the question which had been put to him, of:

"Why has madame taken De Bragelonne's part against me?"

"Why?" replied St. Aignan. "Your majesty forgets, I presume, that the Comte de Guiche is the intimate friend of the Vicomte de Bragelonne?"

"I do not see the connection, however," said the king.

"Ah! I beg your pardon, then, sire; but I thought the Comte de Guiche was a very great friend of madame."

"Quite true," the king returned; "there is no occasion to search any further; the blow came from that direction."

"And is not your majesty of opinion that, in order to ward it off, it will be necessary to deal another blow?"

"Yes, but not one of the kind given in the Bois de Vincennes," replied the king.

"You forget, sire," said St. Aignan, "that I am a gentleman, and that I have been challenged."

"The challenge neither concerns nor was it intended for you."

"But it is I who have been expected at the Minimes, sire, during the last hour and more; and I shall be dishonored if I do not go there."

"The first honor and duty of a gentleman is obedience to his sovereign."

"Sire!"

"I order you to remain."

"Sire!"

"Obey, monsieur."

"As your majesty pleases."

"Besides, I wish to have the whole of this affair explained; I wish to know how it is that I have been so insolently trifled with as to have the sanctuary of my affections pried into. It is not you, St. Aignan, who ought to punish those who have acted in this manner, for it is not your honor they have attacked, but my own."

"I implore your majesty not to overwhelm Monsieur de Bragelonne with your wrath, for although in the whole of this affair he may have shown himself deficient in prudence, he has not been so in his feelings of loyalty."

"Enough! I shall know how to decide between the just and the unjust, even in the height of my anger. But take care that not a word of this is breathed to madame."

"But what am I to do with regard to Monsieur de Bragelonne? He will be seeking me in every direction, and——"

"I shall either have spoken to him, or taken care that he has been spoken to, before the evening is over."

"Let me once more entreat your majesty to be indulgent toward him."

"I have been indulgent long enough, comte," said Louis XIV., frowning severely; "it is now quite time to show certain persons that I am master in my own palace."

The king had hardly pronounced these words, which betokened that a fresh feeling of dissatisfaction was mingled with the remembrance of an old one, when an usher appeared at the door of the cabinet.

"What is the matter?" inquired the king, "and why do you presume to come when I have not summoned you?"

"Sire," said the usher, "your majesty desired me to permit Monsieur le Comte de la Fere to pass freely on any and every occasion when he might wish to speak to your majesty."

"Well, monsieur?"

"Monsieur le Comte de la Fere is now waiting to see your majesty."

The king and St. Aignan at this reply exchanged a look which betrayed more uneasiness than surprise. Louis hesitated for a moment, but immediately afterward, seeming to make up his mind, he said:

"Go, St. Aignan, and find Louise; inform her of the plot against us; do not let her be ignorant that madame will return to her system of persecutions against her, and that she has set those to work for whom it would have been far better to have remained neuter."

"Sire——"

"If Louise gets nervous and frightened, reassure her as much as you can; tell her that the king's affection is an impenetrable shield over her; if, which I suspect is the case, she already knows everything, or if she has already been herself subjected to an attack of some kind or other from any quarter, tell her, be sure to tell her, St. Aignan," added the king, trembling with passion, "tell her, I say, that this time, instead of defending her, I will avenge her, and that, too, so terribly that no one will in future even dare to raise his eyes toward her."

"Is that all, sire?"

"Yes, all. Go as quickly as you can, and remain faithful; for you who live in the midst of this state of infernal torments have not, like myself, the hope of the paradise beyond it."

St. Aignan exhausted himself almost in protestations of devotion, took the king's hand, kissed it, and left the room radiant with delight.

CHAPTER LVIII.

KING AND NOBILITY.

The king endeavored to recover his self-possession as quickly as possible, in order to meet M. de la Fere with an undisturbed countenance. He clearly saw it was not mere chance that had induced the comte's visit, he had some vague impression of its importance; but he felt that to a man of Athos' tone of mind, to one of his high order of intellect, his first reception ought not to present anything either disagreeable or otherwise than kind and courteous. As soon as the king had satisfied himself that, as far as appearances were concerned, he was perfectly calm again, he gave directions to the ushers to introduce the comte. A few minutes afterward Athos, in full court dress, and with his breast covered with the orders that he alone had the right to wear at the Court of France, presented himself with so grave and solemn an air that the king perceived, at the first glance, that he was not deceived in his anticipations. Louis advanced a step toward the comte, and, with a smile, held out his hand to him, over which Athos bowed with the air of the deepest respect.

"Monsieur le Comte de la Fere," said the king rapidly, "you are so seldom here, that it is a real piece of good fortune to see you."

Athos bowed, and replied:

"I should wish always to enjoy the happiness of being near your majesty."

The tone, however, in which this reply was conveyed evidently signified, "I should wish to be one of your majesty's advisers, to save you the commission of faults." The king felt it so, and determined in this man's presence to preserve all the advantages which could be derived from his command over himself, as well as from his rank and position.

"I see you have something to say to me," he said.

"Had it not been so I should not have presumed to present myself before your majesty."

"Speak quickly; I am anxious to satisfy you," returned the king, seating himself.

"I am persuaded," replied Athos, in a slightly agitated tone of voice, "that your majesty will give me every satisfaction."

"Ah!" said the king, with a certain haughtiness of manner, "you have come to lodge a complaint here, then?"

"It would be a complaint," returned Athos, "only in the event of your majesty—but if you will deign to permit me, sire, I will repeat the conversation from the very commencement."

"Do so; I am listening."

"Your majesty will remember that at the period of the Duke of Buckingham's departure, I had the honor of an interview with you."

"At or about that period, I think I remember you did; only with regard to the subject of the conversation, I have quite forgotten it."

Athos started, as he replied:

"I shall have the honor to remind your majesty of it. It was with regard to a formal demand I had addressed to you respecting a marriage which Monsieur de Bragelonne wished to contract with Mademoiselle de la Valliere."

"Ah!" thought the king, "we have come to it now. I remember," he said aloud.

"At that period," pursued Athos, "your majesty was so kind and generous toward Monsieur de Bragelonne and myself that not a single word which then fell from your lips has escaped my memory; and when I asked your majesty to accord me Mademoiselle de la Valliere's hand for Monsieur de Bragelonne, you refused."

"Quite true," said Louis dryly.

"Alleging," Athos hastened to say, "that the young lady had no position in society."

Louis could hardly force himself to listen patiently.

"That," added Athos, "she had but little fortune."

The king threw himself back in his armchair.

"That her extraction was indifferent."

A renewed impatience on the part of the king.

"And little beauty," added Athos pitilessly.

This last bolt buried itself deep in the king's heart, and made him almost bound from his seat.

"You have a good memory, monsieur," he said.

"I invariably have, on all occasions when I have had the distinguished honor of an interview with your majesty," retorted the comte, without being in the least disconcerted.

"Very good; it is admitted I said all that."

"And I thanked your majesty for your remarks at the time, because they testified an interest in Monsieur de Bragelonne which did him much honor."

"And you may possibly remember," said the king, very deliberately, "that you had the greatest repugnance for this marriage."

"Quite true, sire."

"And that you solicited my permission much against your own inclination?"

"Yes, sire."

"And, finally, I remember, for I have a memory nearly as good as your own, I remember, I say, that you observed at the time, 'I do not believe that Mademoiselle de la Valliere loves Monsieur de Bragelonne.' Is that true?"

The blow told well, but Athos did not draw back.

"Sire," he said, "I have already begged your majesty's forgiveness; but there are certain particulars in that conversation which are only intelligible from the *dénouement.*"

"Well, what is the *dénouement,* monsieur?"

"This: your majesty then said, 'that you would defer the marriage out of regard for Monsieur de Bragelonne's own interests.' "

The king remained silent.

"Monsieur de Bragelonne is now so exceedingly unhappy that he cannot any longer defer asking your majesty for a solution of the matter."

The king turned pale; Athos looked at him with fixed attention.

"And what," said the king, with considerable hesitation, "does Monsieur de Bragelonne request?"

"Precisely the very thing that I came to ask your majesty for at my last audience, namely, your majesty's consent to his marriage."

The king remained perfectly silent.

"The questions which referred to the different obstacles in the way are all now quite removed for us," continued Athos. "Mademoiselle de la Valliere, without fortune, birth, or beauty, is not the less, on that account, the only good match in the world for Monsieur de Bragelonne, since he loves this young girl."

The king pressed his hands impatiently together.

"Does your majesty hesitate?" inquired the comte, without losing a particle either of his firmness or his politeness.

"I do not hesitate—I refuse," replied the king.

Athos paused a moment, as if to collect himself.

"I have had the honor," he said, in a mild tone, "to observe to your majesty that no obstacle now interferes with Monsieur de Bragelonne's affections, and that his determination seems unalterable."

"There is my will—and that is an obstacle, I should imagine!"

"That is the most serious of all," Athos replied quickly.

"Ah!"

"And may we, therefore, be permitted to ask your majesty, with the greatest humility, for your reason for this refusal?"

"The reason! A question to me!" exclaimed the king.

"A demand, sire."

The king, leaning with both his hands upon the table, said, in a deep tone of concentrated passion:

"You have lost all recollection of what is usual at court. At court, please to remember, no one ventures to put a question to the king."

"Very true, sire; but if men do not question, they conjecture."

"Conjecture! What may that mean, monsieur?"

"Very frequently, sire, conjecture with regard to a particular subject implies a want of frankness on the part of the king——"

"Monsieur!"

"And a want of confidence on the part of the subject," pursued Athos intrepidly.

"You are forgetting yourself," said the king, hurried away by his anger, in spite of his control over himself.

"Sire, I am obliged to seek elsewhere for what I thought I should find in your majesty. Instead of obtaining a reply from you, I am compelled to make one for myself."

The king rose.

"Monsieur le Comte," he said, "I have now given you all the time I had at my disposal."

This was a dismissal.

"Sire," replied the comte, "I have not yet had time to tell your majesty what I came with the express object of saying, and I so rarely see you majesty that I ought to avail myself of the opportunity."

"Just now you spoke of conjectures; you are now becoming offensive, monsieur."

"Oh, sire! offend your majesty—I? Never! All my life through have I maintained that kings are above all other men, not only from their rank and power, but from their nobleness of heart and their true dignity of mind. I never can bring myself to believe that my sovereign, he who passed his word to me, did so with a mental reservation."

"What do you mean? what mental reservation do you allude to?"

"I will explain my meaning," said Athos coldly. "If, in refusing Mademoiselle de la Valliere to Monsieur de Bragelonne, your majesty had some other object in view than the happiness and fortune of the vicomte——"

"You perceive, monsieur, that you are offending me."

"If, in requiring the vicomte to delay his marriage, your majesty's only object was to remove the gentleman to whom Mademoiselle de la Valliere was engaged——"

"Monsieur! monsieur!"

"I have heard it said so in every direction, sire. Your majesty's affection for Mademoiselle de la Valliere is spoken of on all sides."

The king tore his gloves, which he had been biting for some time.

"Woe to those," he cried, "who interfere in my affairs. I have made up my mind to take a particular course, and I will break through every obstacle in my way."

"What obstacle?" said Athos.

The king stopped short, like a horse which, having taken the bit between his teeth and run away, finds it had slipped back again, and that his career was checked.

"I love Mademoiselle de la Valliere," he said suddenly, with mingled nobleness of feeling and passion.

"But," interrupted Athos, that does not preclude your majesty from allowing Monsieur de Bragelonne to marry Mademoiselle de la Valliere. The sacrifice is worthy of so great a monarch; it is fully merited by Monsieur de Bragelonne, who has already rendered great service to your majesty, and who may well be regarded as a brave and worthy man. Your majesty, therefore, in renouncing the affection you entertain, offers a proof at once of generosity, gratitude, and good policy."

"Mademoiselle de la Valliere does not love Monsieur de Bragelonne," said the king hoarsely.

"Does your majesty know that to be the case?" remarked Athos with a searching look.

"I do know it."

"Since a very short time, then; for, doubtless, had your majesty known it when I first preferred my request, you would have taken the trouble to inform me of it."

"Since a very short time, truly, monsieur."

Athos remained silent for a moment, and then resumed:

"In that case, I do not understand why your majesty should have sent Monsieur de Bragelonne to London. That exile, and most properly so, too, is a matter of as-

tonishment to every one who regards your majesty's honor with sincere affection."

"Who presumes to speak of my honor, Monsieur de la Fere?"

"The king's honor, sire, is made up of the honor of his whole nobility. Whenever the king offends one of his gentlemen, that is, whenever he deprives him of the smallest particle of his honor, it is from him, from the king himself, that that portion of honor is stolen."

"Monsieur de la Fere!" said the king haughtily.

"Sire, you sent Monsieur de Bragelonne to London either before you were Mademoiselle de la Valliere's lover, or since you have become so."

The king, irritated beyond measure, especially because he felt that he was mastered, endeavored to dismiss Athos by a gesture.

"Sire," replied the comte, "I will tell you all; I will not leave your presence until I have been satisfied either by your majesty or by myself; satisfied, if you prove to me that you are right—satisfied, if I prove to you that you are wrong. Nay, sire, you cannot but listen to me. I am old now, and I am attached to everything that is really great and really powerful in your kingdom. I am a gentleman who shed my blood for your father and for yourself, without ever having asked a single favor either from yourself or from your father. I have never inflicted the slightest wrong or injury on any one in this world, and kings even are still my debtors. You cannot but listen to me, I repeat. I have come to ask you for an account of the honor of one of your servants whom you have deceived by a falsehood, or betrayed by a want of heart or judgment. I know that these words irritate your majesty, but the facts themselves are killing us. I know you are endeavoring to find some means to chastise me for my frankness; but I know also the chastisement I will implore God to inflict upon you when I relate to Him your perjury and my son's unhappiness."

The king, during these remarks, was walking hurriedly to and fro, his hand thrust into the breast of his coat, his head haughtily raised, his eyes blazing with wrath.

"Monsieur," he cried suddenly, "if I acted toward you as a king, you would be already punished; but I am only a man, and I have the right to love in this world every one who loves me—a happiness which is so rarely found."

"You cannot pretend to such a right as a man any more

than as a king, sire; or, if you intended to exercise that right in a loyal manner, you should have told Monsieur de Bragelonne so, and not have exiled him."

"I think I am condescending in discussing with you, monsieur!" interrupted Louis XVI., with that majesty of air and manner which he alone seemed able to give to his look and his voice.

"I was hoping that you would reply to me," said the comte.

"You shall know my reply, monsieur."

"You already know my thoughts on the subject," was the Comte de la Fere's answer.

"You have forgotten you are speaking to the king, monsieur. It is a crime."

"You have forgotten you are destroying the lives of two men, sire. It is a mortal sin."

"Leave the room."

"Not until I have said this: 'Son of Louis XIII., you begin your reign badly, for you begin it by abduction and disloyalty! My race—myself, too—are now freed from all that affection and respect toward you which I made my son swear to observe in the vaults of St. Denis, in the presence of the relics of your noble forefathers. You are now become our enemy, sire, and henceforth we have nothing to do save with Heaven alone, our sole master. Be warned!'"

"Do you threaten?"

"Oh, no," said Athos sadly, "I have as little bravado as fear in my soul. The God of whom I spoke to you is now listening to me; He knows that for the safety and honor of your crown I would even yet shed every drop of blood which twenty years of civil and foreign warfare have left in my veins. I can well say, then, that I threaten the king as little as I threaten the man; but I tell you, sire, you lose two servants; for you have destroyed faith in the heart of the father, and love in the heart of the son; the one ceases to believe in the royal word, the other no longer believes in the loyalty of man, or the purity of woman; the one is dead to every feeling of respect, the other to obedience. Adieu!"

Thus saying, Athos broke his sword across his knee, slowly placed the two pieces upon the floor, and saluting the king, who was almost choking from rage and shame, he quitted the cabinet. Louis, who sat near the table, completely overwhelmed, was several minutes before he could

collect himself; but he suddenly rose and rang the bell violently.

"Tell Monsieur d'Artagnan to come here," he said to the terrified ushers.

CHAPTER LIX.

AFTER THE STORM.

Our readers will doubtlessly have been asking themselves how it happened that Athos, of whom not a word has been said for some time past, arrived so very opportunely at court. We will, without delay, endeavor to satisfy their curiosity.

Porthos, faithful to his duty as an arranger of affairs, had, immediately after leaving the Palais Royal, set off to join Raoul at the Minimes in the Bois de Vincennes, and had related everything, even to the smallest details, which had passed between St. Aignan and himself. He finished by saying that the message which the king had sent to his favorite would not probably occasion more than a short delay, and that St. Aignan, as soon as he could leave the king, would not lose a moment in accepting the invitation which Raoul had sent him. But Raoul, less credulous than his old friend, had concluded, from Porthos' recital, that if St. Aignan was going to the king, St. Aignan would tell the king everything; and that the king would, therefore, forbid St. Aignan to obey the summons he had received to the hostile meeting. The consequence of his reflections was, that he had left Porthos to remain at the place appointed for the meeting, in the very improbable case that St. Aignan would come there; and had endeavored to make Porthos promise that he would not remain there more than an hour, or an hour and a half at the very longest. Porthos, however, formally refused to do anything of the kind, but, on the contrary, installed himself in the Minimes as if he were going to take root there, making Raoul promise that when he had been to see his father, he would return to his own apartments, in order that Porthos' servant might know where to find him, in case M. de St. Aignan should happen to come to the rendezvous.

De Bragelonne had left Vincennes, and had proceeded at once straight to the apartments of Athos, who had been in Paris during the last two days, the comte having been

already informed of what had taken place, by a letter from D'Artagnan. Raoul arrived at his father's; Athos, after having held out his hand to him and embraced him most affectionately, made a sign for him to sit down.

"I know you come to me as a man would go to a friend, vicomte, whenever he is suffering; tell me, therefore, what is it that brings you now?"

The young man bowed, and began his recital; more than once, in the course of it, his tears almost choked his utterance, and a sob, checked in his throat, compelled him to suspend his narrative for a few minutes. However, he finished at last. Athos most probably already knew how matters stood, as we have just now said, D'Artagnan had already written to him; but, preserving until the conclusion that calm, unruffled composure of manner which constituted the almost superhuman side of his character, he replied:

"Raoul, I do not believe there is a word of truth in the rumors; I do not believe in the existence of what you fear, although I do not deny that persons most entitled to the fullest credit have already conversed with me on the subject. In my heart and soul I think it utterly impossible that the king could be guilty of such an outrage upon a gentleman. I will answer for the king, therefore, and will soon bring you back the proof of what I say."

Raoul, wavering like a drunken man between what he had seen with his own eyes and the imperturbable faith he had in a man who had never told a falsehood, bowed, and simply answered:

"Go, then, Monsieur le Comte; I will await your return."

And he sat down, burying his face in his hands. Athos dressed, and then left him, in order to wait upon the king; the result of that interview is already known to our readers.

When he returned to his lodgings, Raoul, pale and dejected, had not quitted his attitude of despair. At the sound, however, of the opening doors, and of his father's footsteps as he approached him, the young man raised his head. Athos' face was very pale, his head uncovered, and his manner full of seriousness; he gave his cloak and hat to the lackey, dismissed him with a gesture, and sat down near Raoul.

"Well, monsieur," inquired the young man, "are you quite convinced now?"

"I am, Raoul; the king loves Mademoiselle de la Valliere."

"He confesses it, then?" cried Raoul.

"Yes," replied Athos.

"And she?"

"I have not seen her."

"No; but the king spoke to you about her. What did he say?"

"He says that she loves him."

"Oh! you see—you see, monsieur!" said the young man, with a gesture of despair.

"Raoul," resumed the comte, "I told the king, believe me, all that you yourself could possibly have said; and I believe I did so in becoming language, though sufficiently firm."

"And what did you say to him, monsieur?"

"I told him, Raoul, that everything was now at an end between him and ourselves; that you would never serve him again. I told him that I, too, should remain aloof. Nothing further remains for me, then, but to be satisfied of one thing."

"What is that, monsieur?"

"Whether you have determined to adopt any steps."

"Any steps? Regarding what?"

"With reference to your disappointed affection, and—to your ideas of vengeance."

"Oh, monsieur, with regard to my affection, I shall, perhaps, some day or other, succeed in tearing it from my heart; I trust I shall do so, aided by Heaven's merciful help, and your wise exhortations. As far as vengeance is concerned, it occurred to me only when under the influence of an evil thought, for I could not revenge myself upon the one who is actually guilty; I have, therefore, already renounced every idea of revenge."

"And so you no longer think of seeking a quarrel with Monsieur de St. Aignan?"

"No, monsieur; I sent him a challenge; if Monsieur de St. Aignan accepts it, I will maintain it; if he does not take it up, I will leave it where it is."

"And La Valliere?"

"You cannot, I know, have seriously thought that I should dream of revenging myself upon a woman?" replied Raoul, with a smile so sad that a tear started even to the eyes of his father, who had so many times in the course of his life been bowed beneath his own sorrows and those of others.

He held out his hand to Raoul, which the latter seized most eagerly.

"And so, Monsieur le Comte, you are quite satisfied that the misfortune is without a remedy?" inquired the young man.

"Poor boy!" he murmured.

"You think that I still live in hope," said Raoul, "and you pity me. Oh, it is indeed a horrible suffering for me to despise, as I ought to do, the one I have loved so devotedly. If I only had but some real cause of complaint against her, I should be happy, and should be able to forgive her."

Athos looked at his son with a sorrowful air, for the latter words which Raoul had just pronounced seemed to have issued out of his own heart. At this moment the servant announced M. D'Artagnan. This name sounded very differently to the ears of Athos and of Raoul. The musketeer entered the room with a vague smile upon his lips. Raoul paused. Athos walked toward his friend with an expression of face which did not escape De Bragelonne. D'Artagnan answered Athos' look by an imperceptible movement of the eyelid; and then, advancing toward Raoul, whom he took by the hand, he said, addressing both father and son:

"Well, you are trying to console this poor boy, it seems?"

"And you, kind and good, as usual, are come to help me in my difficult task."

As he said this Athos pressed D'Artagnan's hand between both his own. Raoul fancied he observed in this pressure something beyond the sense his mere words conveyed.

"Yes," replied the musketeer, smoothing his mustache with the hand that Athos had left free, "yes, I have come also."

"You are most welcome, chevalier; not for the consolation you bring with you, but on your own account. I am already consoled," said Raoul; and he attempted to smile, but the effort was far more sad than any tears D'Artagnan had ever seen shed.

"That is all well and good, then," said D'Artagnan.

"Only," continued Raoul, "you have arrived just as the comte was about to give me the details of his interview with the king. You will allow the comte to continue?" added the young man, as, with his eyes fixed on the musketeer, he seemed to read into the very depths of his heart.

"His interview with the king?" said D'Artagnan, in a tone so natural and unassumed that there was no means of suspecting that his astonishment was feigned. "You have seen the king, then, Athos?"

Athos smiled, as he said:

"Yes, I have seen him."

"Ah, indeed! you were not aware, then, that the comte had seen his majesty?" inquired Raoul, half-reassured.

"Yes, indeed, quite so."

"In that case, I am less uneasy," said Raoul.

"Uneasy—and about what?" inquired Athos.

"Forgive me, monsieur," said Raoul, "but knowing so well the regard and affection you have for me, I was afraid you might possibly have expressed somewhat plainly to his majesty my own sufferings and your indignation, and that the king had, consequently——"

"And that the king had, consequently?" repeated D'Artagnan; "well, go on, finish what you were going to say."

"I have now to ask you to forgive me, Monsieur d'Artagnan," said Raoul. "For a moment, and I cannot help confessing it, I trembled lest you had come here, not as Monsieur d'Artagnan, but as captain of the musketeers."

"You are mad, my poor boy!" cried D'Artagnan, with a burst of laughter, in which an exact observer might perhaps have wished to have heard a little more frankness.

"So much the better," said Raoul.

"Yes, mad; and do you know what I would advise you to do?"

"Tell me, monsieur, for the advice is sure to be good as it comes from you."

"Very good, then; I advise you, after your long journey from England, after your visit to Monsieur de Guiche, after your visit to madame, after your visit to Porthos, after your journey to Vincennes, I advise you, I say, to take a few hours' rest; go and lie down, sleep for a dozen hours, and when you wake up, go and ride one of my horses until you have tired him to death."

And drawing Raoul toward him, he embraced him as he would have done his own child. Athos did the like; only it was very visible that the kiss was more affectionate, and the pressure of his lips still warmer with the father than with the friend. The young man again looked at both his companions, endeavoring to penetrate their real meaning, or their real feelings, with the utmost strength of his intelligence; but his look was powerless upon the smiling countenance of the musketeer, or upon the calm and composed features of the Comte de la Fere.

"Where are you going, Raoul?" inquired the latter, seeing that De Bragelonne was preparing to go out.

"To my own apartments," replied the latter, in his soft and sad voice.

"We shall be sure to find you there, then, if we should have anything to say to you?"

"Yes, monsieur; but do you suppose it likely you will have something to say to me?"

"How can I tell?" said Athos.

"Yes, something fresh to console you with," said D'Artagnan, pushing him toward the door.

Raoul, observing the perfect composure which marked every gesture of his two friends, quitted the comte's room, carrying away with him nothing but the individual feeling of his own particular distress.

"Thank Heaven!" he said, "since that is the case, I need only think of myself."

And wrapping himself in his cloak, in order to conceal from the passers-by in the streets his gloomy and sorrowful face, he quitted them, for the purpose of returning to his own rooms, as he had promised Porthos. The two friends watched the young man as he walked away with a feeling akin to pity; only each expressed it in a very different way.

"Poor Raoul!" said Athos, sighing deeply.

"Poor Raoul!" said D'Artagnan, shrugging his shoulders.

CHAPTER LX.

HEU! MISER!

"Poor Raoul!" had said Athos. "Poor Raoul!" had said D'Artagnan; and, in point of fact, to be pitied by both these men Raoul must indeed have been most unhappy. And, therefore, when he found himself alone, face to face, as it were, with his own troubles, leaving behind him the intrepid friend and the indulgent father; when he called the avowal of the king's affection, which had robbed him of Louise de la Valliere, whom he loved so deeply, he felt his heart almost breaking, as indeed we all have at least once in our lives, at the first illusion destroyed, at our first affection betrayed.

"Oh!" he murmured, "all is over, then. Nothing is now left me in this world. Nothing to look for, nothing to hope for. De Guiche has told me so, my father has told me so, and Monsieur d'Artagnan likewise. Everything is a mere idle dream in this life. That future, which I have

been hopelessly pursuing for the last ten years, a dream! that union of our hearts, a dream! that life formed of love and happiness, a dream! Poor fool that I am!" he continued, after a pause, "to dream away my existence aloud, publicly, and in the face of others, my friends and my enemies—and for what purpose, too? in order that my friends may be saddened by my troubles, and that my enemies may laugh at my sorrows. And so my unhappiness will soon become a notorious disgrace, a public scandal; and who knows but that to-morrow I may not even be ignominously pointed at?"

And, despite the composure which he had promised his father and D'Artagnan to observe, Raoul could not resist uttering a few words of dark menace.

"And yet," he continued, "if my name were De Wardes, and if I had the pliant character and strength of will of Monsieur d'Artagnan, I should laugh, with my lips, at least; I should convince other women that this perfidious girl, honored by the affection I have wasted on her, leaves me only one regret, that of having been abused and deceived by her resemblance of a modest and irreproachable conduct; a few men might perhaps fawn upon the king by laughing at my expense; I should put myself on the track of some of those jesters; I should chastise a few of them, perhaps; the men would fear me, and by the time I had laid three dying or dead at my feet, I should be adored by the women. Yes, yes; that indeed would be the proper course to adopt, and the Comte de la Fere himself would not object to it. Has not he also been tried, in his earlier days, in the same manner as I have just been tried myself? Did he not replace affection by intoxication? He has often told me so. Why should not I replace love by pleasure? He must have suffered as much as I suffer, even more so, perhaps. The history of one man is the history of all men, a lengthened trial, more or less so, at least, more or less bitter or sorrowful. The voice of human nature is nothing but one prolonged cry. But what are the sufferings of others compared to those from which I am now suffering? Does the open wound in another's breast soften the pain of the gaping wound in our own? or does the blood which is welling from another man's side stanch that which is pouring from our own? Does the general anguish of our fellow-creatures lessen our own private and particular anguish? No, no; each suffers on his own account, each struggles with his own grief, each sheds his own tears. And, besides," he

went on, "what has my life been up to the present moment? A cold, barren, sterile arena, in which I have always fought for others, never for myself. Sometimes for a king, sometimes for a woman. The king has betrayed me, the women disdained me. Miserable, unhappy wretch that I am! women! Can I not make all expiate the crime of one of their sex? What does that need? To have a heart no longer, or to forget that I ever had one; to be strong, even against weakness itself; to lean always, even when one feels that the support is giving way. What is needed to attain, or succeed in all that? To be young, handsome, strong, valiant, rich. I am, or shall be, all that. But honor?" he still continued, "and what is honor, after all? A theory which every man understands in his own way. My father tells me: 'Honor is the respect of that which is due to others, and particularly what is due to one's self.' But De Guiche, and Manicamp, and St. Aignan, particularly, would say to me: 'What's honor? Honor consists in studying and yielding to the passions and pleasures of one's king.' Honor such as that indeed is easy and productive enough. With honor like that I can keep my post at the court, become a gentleman of the chamber, and accept the command of a regiment, which may have been presented to me. With honor such as that I can be both duke and peer.

"The stain which that woman has just stamped upon me, the grief with which she has just broken my heart, the heart of the friend and playmate of her childhood, in no way affect Monsieur de Bragelonne, an excellent officer, a courageous leader, who will cover himself with glory at the first encounter, and who will become a hundred times greater than Mademoiselle de la Valliere is to-day, the mistress of the king—for the king will not marry her—and the more publicly he will proclaim her as his mistress, the thicker will become the bandage of shame which he casts in her face, in the guise of a crown; and in proportion as others will despise her, as I despise her, I shall be gaining honors in the field. Alas! we had walked together side by side, she and I, during the earliest, the brightest, and best portion of our existence, hand in hand along the charming path of life, covered with the flowers of youth; and then, alas! we reach a crossroad, where she separates herself from me, in which we have to follow a different route, whereby we become more and more widely separated from each other. And to attain the end of this path, oh, Heaven! I am now alone, in utter despair, and crushed to the very earth!"

Such were the sinister reflections in which Raoul indulged, when his foot mechanically paused at the door of his own dwelling. He had reached it without remarking the streets through which he had passed, without knowing how he had come; he pushed open the door, continued to advance, and ascended the staircase. The staircase, as in most of the houses at that period, was very dark, and the landings very obscure. Raoul lived on the first floor; he paused in order to ring. Olivian appeared, took his sword and cloak from his hands; Raoul himself opened the door which, from the antechamber, led into a small salon, richly furnished enough for the salon of a young man, and completely filled with flowers by Olivian, who, knowing his master's tastes, had shown himself studiously attentive in gratifying them, without caring whether his master perceived his attention or not. There was a portrait of La Valliere in the salon, which had been drawn by herself and given by her to Raoul. This portrait, fastened above a large easy-chair covered with dark-colored damask, was the first point toward which Raoul bent his steps—the first object on which he fixed his eyes. It was, moreover, Raoul's usual habit to do so; every time he entered his room this portrait, before anything else, attracted his attention. This time, as usual, he walked straight up to the portrait, placed his knees upon the armchair, and paused to look at it sadly. His arms were crossed upon his breast, his head slightly thrown back, his eyes filled with tears, his mouth worked into a bitter smile. He looked at the portrait of one whom he so tenderly loved; and then all that he had said passed before his mind again, and all that he had suffered seemed again to assail his heart; and, after a long silence, he murmured for the third time:

"Miserable, unhappy wretch that I am!"

He had hardly pronounced these words, when he heard the sound of a sigh and a groan behind him. He turned sharply round, and perceived, in the angle of the salon, standing up, a bending veiled female figure, which he had been the means of concealing behind the door as he opened it, and which he had not perceived as he entered. He advanced toward this figure, whose presence in his room had not been announced to him; and as he bowed, and inquired at the same moment who she was, she suddenly raised her head, and removed the veil from her face, revealing her pale and sorrow-stricken features. Raoul staggered back, as if he had seen a ghost.

"Louise!" he cried, in a tone of such utter despair that one could hardly have thought that the human voice were capable of so desponding a cry without some fibers of the human heart snapping.

CHAPTER LXI.

WOUNDS UPON WOUNDS.

Mlle. de la Valliere—for it was indeed she—advanced a few steps toward him.

"Yes—Louise," she murmured.

But this interval, short as it had been, was quite sufficient for Raoul to recover himself.

"You, mademoiselle!" he said; and then added, in an indefinable tone, "You here!"

"Yes, Raoul," the young girl replied; "I have been waiting for you."

"I beg your pardon. When I came into the room, I was not aware——"

"I know; but I entreated Olivian not to tell you——"

She hesitated; and as Raoul did not attempt to interrupt her, a moment's silence ensued, during which the sound of their throbbing hearts might have been heard, not in unison with each other, but the one beating as violently as the other. It was for Louise to speak, and she made an effort to do so.

"I wished to speak to you," she said. "It was absolutely necessary that I should see you—myself—alone. I have not hesitated adopting a step which must remain secret; for no one, except yourself, could understand my motive, Monsieur de Bragelonne."

"In fact, mademoiselle," Raoul stammered out, almost breathless from emotion, "as far as I am concerned, and despite the good opinion you have of me, I confess——"

"Will you do me the great kindness to sit down and listen to me?" said Louise, interrupting him with her soft, sweet voice.

De Bragelonne looked at her for a moment; then, mournfully shaking his head, he sat, or rather, fell down on a chair.

"Speak," he said.

She cast a glance all round her. This look was a timid entreaty, and implored secrecy far more effectually than her

expressed words had done a few minutes before. Raoul rose, and went to the door, which he opened.

"Olivian," he said, "I am not within for any one." And then, turning toward Louise, he added, "Is not that what you wished?"

Nothing could have produced a greater effect upon Louise than these few words, which seemed to signify, "You see that I still understand you." She passed a handkerchief across her eyes, in order to remove a rebellious tear which she could not restrain; and then, having collected herself for a moment, she said:

"Raoul, do not turn your kind, frank look away from me. You are not one of those men who despise a woman for having given her heart to another, even though her affection might render him unhappy, or might wound his pride."

Raoul did not reply.

"Alas!" continued La Valliere, "it is only too true, my cause is a bad one, and I cannot tell in what way to begin. It will be better for me, I think, to relate to you, very simply, everything that has befallen me. As I shall speak but the pure and simple truth, I shall always find my path clear before me in the obscurity, hesitation, and obstacles which I have to brave in order to solace my heart, which is full to overflowing, and wishes to pour itself out at your feet."

Raoul continued to preserve the same unbroken silence. La Valliere looked at him with an air that seemed to say, "Encourage me; for pity's sake, but a single word!" But Raoul did not open his lips; and the young girl was obliged to continue:

"Just now," she said, "Monsieur de St. Aignan came to me, by the king's directions." She cast down her eyes as she said this, while Raoul, on his side, turned his away, in order to avoid looking at her. "Monsieur de St. Aignan came to me from the king," she repeated, "and told me that you knew all;" and she attempted to look Raoul in the face, after inflicting this further wound upon him, in addition to the many others he had already received; but it was impossible to meet Raoul's eyes. "He told me you were incensed with me—and justly so, I admit."

This time Raoul looked at the young girl, and a smile full of disdain passed across his lips.

"Oh!" she continued, "I entreat you, do not say that you have had any other feeling against me than that of anger merely. Raoul, wait until I have told you all—wait

until I have said to you all that I had to say—all that I came to say."

Raoul, by the strength of his own iron will, forced his features to assume a calmer expression, and the disdainful smile upon his lips passed away.

"In the first place," said La Valliere, "in the first place, with my hands raised in entreaty toward you, with my forehead bowed to the ground before you, I entreat you, as the most generous, as the noblest of men, to pardon, to forgive me. If I have left you in ignorance of what was passing in my own bosom, never, at least, would I have consented to deceive you. Oh! I entreat you, Raoul—I implore you on my knees—answer me one word, even though you wronged me in doing so. Better, far better, an injurious word from your lips, than a suspicion from your heart."

"I admire your subtlety of expression, mademoiselle," said Raoul, making an effort to remain calm. "To leave another in ignorance that you are deceiving him is loyal; but to deceive him—it seems that would be very wrong, and that you would not do it."

"Monsieur, for a long time I thought that I loved you better than anything else; and so long as I believed in my affection for you, I told you that I loved you. I could have sworn it on the altar; but a day came when I was undeceived."

"Well, on that day, mademoiselle, knowing that I still continued to love you, true loyalty of conduct ought to have obliged you to tell me you had ceased to love me."

"But on that day, Raoul—on that day, when I read in the depths of my own heart, when I confessed to myself that you no longer filled my mind entirely, when I saw another future before me than that of being your friend, your lifelong companion, your wife—on that day, Raoul, you were not, alas! any more beside me."

"But you knew where I was, mademoiselle; you could have written to me."

"Raoul, I did not dare to do so. Raoul, I have been weak and cowardly. I knew you so thoroughly—I knew how devotedly you loved me, that I trembled at the bare idea of the grief I was going to cause you; and that is so true, Raoul, that this very moment I am now speaking to you, bending thus before you, my heart crushed in my bosom, my voice full of sighs, my eyes full of tears, it is so perfectly true, that I have no other defense than my frankness, I have no other sorrow greater than that which I read in your eyes."

Raoul attempted to smile.

"No!" said the young girl, with a profound conviction, "no, no; you will not do me so foul a wrong as to disguise your feelings before me now! You loved me; you were sure of your affections for me; you did not deceive yourself; you did not lie to your own heart—while I—I——"

And pale as death, her arms thrown despairingly above her head, she fell upon her knees.

"While you," said Raoul, "you told me you loved me, and yet you loved another."

"Alas! yes," cried the poor girl; "alas! yes. I do love another; and that other—oh! for Heaven's sake, let me say it, Raoul, for it is my only excuse—that other I love better than my own life, better than my own soul even. Forgive my fault, or punish my treason, Raoul. I came here in no way to defend myself, but merely to say to you: 'You know what it is to love!' in that case, I love! I love to that degree that I would give my life, my very soul, to the man I love. If he should ever cease to love me, I shall die of grief and despair, unless Heaven comes to my assistance, unless Heaven does show pity upon me. Raoul, I came here to submit myself to your will, whatever it might be—to die, if it were your wish I should die. Kill me, then, Raoul! if in your heart you believe I deserve death!"

"Take care, mademoiselle," said Raoul; "the woman who invites death is one who has nothing but her heart's blood to offer to her deceived and betrayed lover."

"You are right," she said.

Raoul uttered a deep sigh, as he exclaimed:

"And you love without being able to forget?"

"I love without a wish to forget, without a wish ever to love any one else," replied La Valliere.

"Very well," said Raoul. "You have said to me, in fact, all you had to say; all I could possibly wish to know. And now, mademoiselle, it is I who ask your forgiveness, for it is I who have almost been an obstacle in your life; I, too, who have been wrong, for, in deceiving myself, I helped to deceive you."

"Oh!" said La Valliere, "I do not ask you so much as that, Raoul."

"I only am to blame, mademoiselle," continued Raoul; "better informed than yourself of the difficulties of this life, I should have enlightened you. I ought not to have relied upon uncertainty; I ought to have extracted an answer from your heart, while I hardly even sought an

acknowledgment from your lips. Once more, mademoiselle, it is I who ask your forgiveness."

"Impossible, impossible!" she cried, "you are mocking me."

"How, impossible?"

"Yes, it is impossible to be good, and excellent, and perfect to such a degree as that."

"Take care!" said Raoul, with a bitter smile, "for presently you may say, perhaps, I did not love you."

"Oh! you love me like an affectionate brother; let me hope that, Raoul."

"As a brother! Undeceive yourself, Louise; I loved you as a lover—as a husband, with the deepest, the truest, the fondest affection."

"Raoul, Raoul!"

"As a brother! Oh, Louise! I loved you so deeply that I would have shed my blood for you, drop by drop; I would, oh! how willingly, have suffered myself to be torn to pieces for your sake, have sacrificed my very future for you. I loved you so deeply, Louise, that my heart feels dead and crushed within me—that my faith in human nature is gone —that my eyes seem to have lost their light; I loved you so deeply that I now no longer see, think of, care for anything, either in this world or in the next."

"Raoul—dear Raoul, spare me, I implore you!" cried La Valliere. "Oh! if I had but known."

"It is too late, Louise; you love, you are happy in your affection; I read your happiness through your tears—behind the tears which the loyalty of your nature makes you shed; I feel the sighs which your affection breathes forth. Louise, Louise, you have made me the most abjectly wretched man living; leave me, I entreat you. Adieu! adieu!"

"Forgive me! oh, forgive me, Raoul, for what I have done!"

"Have I not done more? Have I not told you that I loved you still?"

She buried her face in her hands.

"And to tell you that—do you hear me, Louise?—to tell you that, at such a moment as this, to tell you that, as I have told you, is to pronounce my own sentence of death. Adieu!"

La Valliere wished to hold out her hands to him.

"We ought not to see each other again in this world," he said; and as she was on the point of calling out in bitter agony at this remark, he placed his hand on her mouth to stifle the exclamation.

She pressed her lips upon it, and fell fainting to the ground.

"Olivian," said Raoul, "take this young lady and bear her to the carriage which is waiting for her at the door."

As Olivian lifted her up, Raoul made a movement as if to dart toward La Valliere, in order to give her a first and last kiss, but, stopping abruptly, he said:

"No! she is not mine. I am not a thief, like the king of France."

And he returned to his room, while the lackey carried La Valliere, still fainting, to the carriage.

CHAPTER LXII.

WHAT RAOUL HAD GUESSED.

As soon as Raoul had quitted Athos and D'Artagnan, and as soon as the two exclamations which had followed his departure had escaped their lips, they found themselves face to face alone. Athos immediately resumed the earnest air that he had assumed at D'Artagnan's arrival.

"Well," he said, "what have you come to announce to me, my friend?"

"I?" inquired D'Artagnan.

"Yes; I do not see you in this way without some reason for it," said Athos, smiling.

"The deuce!" said D'Artagnan.

"I will place you at your ease. The king is furious, I suppose?"

"Well, I must say he is not altogether pleased."

"And you have come to arrest me, then?"

"My dear friend, you have hit the very mark."

"Oh, I expected it. I am quite ready to go with you."

"Deuce take it!" said D'Artagnan, "what a hurry you are in."

"I am afraid of delaying you," said Athos, smiling.

"I have plenty of time. Are you not curious, besides, to know how things went on between the king and me?"

"If you will be good enough to tell me, I will listen with the greatest of pleasure," said Athos, pointing out to D'Artagnan a large chair, into which the latter threw himself, assuming the easiest possible attitude.

"Well, I will do so willingly enough," continued D'Ar-

tagnan, "for the conversation is rather curious, I must say. In the first place, the king sent for me."

"As soon as I had left?"

"You were just going down the last steps of the staircase, as the musketeers told me. I arrived. My dear Athos, he was not red in the face merely, he was positively purple. I was not aware, of course, of what had passed; only, on the ground, lying on the floor, I saw a sword broken in two.

" 'Captain d'Artagnan,' cried the king, as soon as he saw me.

" 'Sire,' I replied.

" 'Monsieur de la Free has just left me; he is an insolent man.'

" 'An insolent man!' I exclaimed, in such a tone that the king stopped suddenly short.

" 'Captain d'Artagnan,' resumed the king, with his teeth clinched, 'you will be good enough to listen to and hear me.'

" 'That is my duty, sire.'

" 'I have, out of consideration for Monsieur de la Fere, wished to spare him, of whom I still retain some kind recollections, the discredit of being arrested in my palace. You will, therefore, take a carriage.'

"At this I made a slight movement.

" 'If you object to arrest him yourself,' continued the king, 'send me my captain of the guards here.'

" 'Sire,' I replied, 'there is no necessity for the captain of the guards, since I am on duty.'

" 'I should not like to annoy you,' said the king kindly, 'for you have always served me well, Monsieur d'Artagnan.'

" 'You do not "annoy" me, sire,' I replied; 'I am on duty, that is all.'

" 'But,' said the king, in astonishment, 'I believe the comte is your friend?'

" 'If he were my father, sire, it would not make me less on duty than I am.'

"The king looked at me; he saw how unmoved my face was, and seemed satisfied.

" 'You will arrest Monsieur le Comte de la Fere, then?' he inquired.

" 'Most certainly, sire, if you give me the order to do so.'

" 'Very well; I order you to do so.'

"I bowed, and replied:

" 'Where is the comte, sire?'

" 'You will look for him.'

"'And I am to arrest him, wherever he may be?

"'Yes; but try that he may be at his own house. If he should have started for his own estate, leave Paris at once, and arrest him on his way thither.'

"I bowed; but as I did not move, he said:

"Well, what are you waiting for?'

"'For the order to arrest the comte, signed by yourself.'

"The king seemed annoyed; for, in point of fact, it was the exercise of a fresh act of authority; a repetition of the arbitrary act, if, indeed, it is to be considered as such. He took hold of his pen slowly, and evidently in no very good temper, and then he wrote, 'Order for Monsieur le Chevalier d'Artagnan, captain of my musketeers, to arrest Monsieur le Comte de la Fere, wherever he is to be found. He then turned toward me, but I was looking on without moving a muscle of my face. In all probability, he thought he perceived something like bravado in my tranquil manner for he signed hurriedly, and then, handing me the order, he said:

"'Go, monsieur.'

"I obeyed, and here I am."

Athos pressed his friend's hand.

"Well, let us set off," he said.

"Oh, surely," said D'Artagnan, "you must have some trifling matters to arrange before you leave your apartments in this manner?"

"I—not at all."

"Why not?"

"Why, you know, D'Artagnan, that I have always been a very simple traveler on this earth, ready to go to the end of the world by the order of my sovereign, ready to quit it at the summons of my Maker. What does a man who is thus prepared require in such a case?—a portmanteau, or a shroud? I am ready at this moment, as I have always been, my dear friend, and can accompany you at once."

"But De Bragelonne——"

"I have brought him up in the same principles I laid down for my own guidance; and you observed that, as soon as he perceived you, he guessed, that very moment, the motive of your visit. We have thrown him off his guard for a moment; but do not be uneasy, he is sufficiently prepared for my disgrace to be too much alarmed at it. So, let us go."

"Very well; 'let us go,'" said D'Artagnan quietly.

"As I broke my sword in the king's presence, and threw

the pieces at his feet, I presume that will dispense with the necessity of delivering it over to you."

"You are quite right; and, besides that, what the deuce do you suppose I could do with your sword?"

"Am I to walk behind or before you?" inquired Athos, laughing.

"You will walk arm in arm with me," replied D'Artagnan, as he took the comte's arm to descend the staircase; and in this manner they arrived at the landing.

Grimaud, whom they had met in the anteroom, looked at them as they went out together in this manner, with some little uneasiness; his experience of affairs was quite sufficient to give him good reason to suspect that there was something wrong.

"Ah! is that you, Grimaud?" said Athos kindly. "We are going——"

"To take a turn in my carriage," interrupted D'Artagnan, with a friendly nod of the head.

Grimaud thanked D'Artagnan by a grimace, which was evidently intended for a smile, and accompanied both the friends to the door. Athos entered first into the carriage; D'Artagnan followed him, without saying a word to the coachman. The departure had taken place so quietly that it excited no disturbance or attention even in the neighborhood. When the carriage had reached the quays:

"You are taking me to the Bastile, I perceive," said Athos.

"I?" said D'Artagnan, "I take you wherever you may choose to go; nowhere else, I can assure you."

"What do you mean?" said the comte, surprised.

"Why, surely, my dear friend," said D'Artagnan, "you quite understand that I undertook the mission with no other object in view than that of carrying it out exactly as you liked. You surely did not expect that I was going to get you thrown into prison like that, brutally, and without any reflection? If I had not anticipated that, I should have let the captain of the guards undertake it."

"And so?" said Athos.

"And so, I repeat again, we will go wherever you may choose."

"My dear friend," said Athos, embracing D'Artagnan, "how like you that is!"

"Well, it seems simple enough to me. The coachman will take you to the barrier of the Cours la Reine; you will find a horse there which I have ordered to be kept ready for

you; with that horse you will be able to do three posts without stopping; and I, on my side, will take care not to return to the king, to tell him that you have gone away, until the very moment it will be impossible to overtake you. In the meantime, you will have reached Havre, and from Havre across to England, where you will find the charming residence of which Monsieur Monk made me a present, without speaking of the hospitality which King Charles will not fail to show you. Well, what do you think of this project?"

Athos shook his head, and then said, smiling as he did so:

"No, no; take me to the Bastile."

"You are an obstinate-headed fellow, dear Athos," returned D'Artagnan; "reflect for a few moments."

"Upon what?"

"That you are no longer twenty years of age. Believe me, I speak according to my own knowledge and experience. A prison is certain death for men of our time of life. No, no; I will never allow you to languish in prison in such a way. Why, the very thought of it makes my head turn giddy."

"Dear D'Artagnan," Athos replied, "Heaven, most fortunately, made my body as strong, powerful, and enduring as my mind; and, rely upon it, I shall retain my strength up to the very last moment."

"But this is not strength of mind or character; it is sheer madness."

"No, D'Artagnan, it is the highest order of reasoning. Do not suppose that I should in the slightest degree in the world discuss the question with you, whether you would not be ruined in endeavoring to save me. I should have done precisely as you are doing if flight had been part of my plan of action; I should, therefore, have accepted from you what, without any doubt, you would have accepted from me. No; I know you too well even to breathe a word upon the subject."

"Ah! if you would only let me do it," said D'Artagnan, "how I would send the king running after you!"

"Still, he is the king; do not forget that, my dear friend."

"Oh! that is all the same to me; and king though he be, I would plainly tell him, 'Sire, imprison, exile, kill every one in France and Europe; order me to arrest and poniard even whom you like—even were it Monsieur, your own brother; but do not touch one of the four musketeers, or, if so, *mordioux!*—' "

"My dear friend," replied Athos, with perfect calmness,

"I should like to persuade you of one thing, namely, that I wish to be arrested, that I desire, above all things, that my arrest should take place."

D'Artagnan made a light movement of his shoulders.

"Nay, I wish it, I repeat, more than anything; if you were to let me escape, it would be only to return of my own accord, and constitute myself a prisoner. I wish to prove to this young man who is dazzled by the power and splendor of his crown that he can be regarded as the first and chiefest among men only on one condition of his proving himself to be the most generous and the wisest among them. He may punish me, imprison or torture me, it matters not. He abuses his opportunities, and I wish him to learn the bitterness of remorse, while Heaven teaches him what a chastisement is."

"Well, well!" replied D'Artagnan, "I know only too well that when you have once said 'no,' you mean 'no.' I do not insist any longer; you wish to go to the Bastile?"

"I do wish to go there."

"Let us go, then. To the Bastile!" cried D'Artagnan to the coachman.

And throwing himself back in the carriage, he gnawed the ends of his mustache with a fury which, for Athos, who knew him well, signified a resolution either already taken or in course of formation. A profound silence ensued in the carriage, which continued to roll on, but neither faster now slower than before. Athos took the musketeer by the hand.

"You are not angry with me, D'Artagnan?" he said.

"I?—oh, no, certainly not; of course not. What you do from heroism I should have done from sheer obstinacy."

"But you are quite of opinion, are you not, that Heaven will avenge me, D'Artagnan?"

"And I know some persons on earth who will lend a helping hand," said the captain.

CHAPTER LXIII.

THREE GUESTS ASTONISHED TO FIND THEMSELVES AT SUPPER TOGETHER.

THE carriage arrived at the outside gate of the Bastile. A soldier on guard stopped it, but D'Artagnan had only to

utter a single word to procure admittance, and the carriage passed on without further difficulty. While they were proceeding along the covered way which led to the courtyard of the governor's residence, D'Artagnan, whose lynx eyes saw everything, even through the walls, suddenly cried out:

"What is that out yonder?"

"Well," said Athos quietly, "what is it?"

"Look yonder, Athos!"

"In the courtyard?"

"Yes, yes; make haste!"

"Well, a carriage; very likely conveying a prisoner like myself."

"That would be too droll."

"I do not understand you."

"Make haste and look again, and look at the man who is just getting out of that carriage."

At that very moment a second sentinel stopped D'Artagnan, and while the formalities were being gone through, Athos could see at a hundred paces from him the man whom his friend had pointed out to him. He was, in fact, getting out of the carriage at the door of the governor's house.

"Well," inquired D'Artagnan, "do you see him?"

"Yes; he is a man in a gray suit."

"What do you say of him?"

"I cannot very well tell; he is, as I have just now told you, a man in a gray suit, who is getting out of a carriage; that is all."

"Athos, I will wager anything that it is he."

"He—who?"

"Aramis."

"Aramis arrested? Impossible!"

"I do not say he is arrested, since we see him alone in his carriage."

"Well, then, what is he doing here?"

"Oh, he knows Baisemeaux, the governor," replied the musketeer shyly, "so we have arrived just in time."

"What for?"

"In order to see what we can see."

"I regret this meeting exceedingly. When Aramis sees me, he will be very much annoyed, in the first place, at seeing me, and in the next at being seen."

"Very well reasoned."

"Unfortunately, there is no remedy for it; whenever any one meets another in the Bastile, even if he wished to draw back to avoid him, it would be impossible."

"Athos, I have an idea; the question is, to spare Aramis the annoyance you were speaking of, is it not?"

"What is to be done?"

"I will tell you; or, in order to explain myself in the best possible way, let me relate the affair in my own manner; I will not recommend you to tell a falsehood, for that would be impossible for you to do; but I will tell falsehoods enough for both; it is so easy to do that with the nature and habits of a Gascon."

Athos smiled. The carriage stopped where the one we have just now pointed out had stopped; namely, at the door of the governor's house.

"It is understood, then?" said D'Artagnan, in a low voice to his friend.

Athos consented by a gesture. They ascended the staircase. There will be no occasion for surprise at the facility with which they had entered into the Bastile, if it be remembered that, before passing the first gate, in fact, the most difficult of all, D'Artagnan had announced that he had brought a prisoner of state. At the third gate, on the contrary, that is to say, when he had once fairly entered the prison, he merely said to the sentinel:

"To Monsieur Baisemeaux;" and they both passed on.

In a few minutes they were in the governor's dining-room, and the first face which attracted D'Artagnan's observation was that of Aramis, who was seated side by side with Baisemeaux, and awaited the announcement of a good meal whose odor impregnated the whole apartment. If D'Artagnan pretended surprise, Aramis did not pretend at all; he started when he saw his two friends, and his emotion was very apparent. Athos and D'Artagnan, however, complimented him as usual, and Baisemeaux, amazed, completely stupefied by the presence of his three guests, began to perform a few evolutions around them.

"By what lucky accident——"

"We were just going to ask you," retorted D'Artagnan.

"Are we going to give ourselves up as prisoners?" cried Aramis with an affectation of hilarity.

"Ah, ah!" said D'Artagnan; "it is true the walls smell deucedly like a prison. Monsieur de Baisemeaux, you know you invited me to sup with you the other day."

"I!" cried Baisemeaux.

"Yes, of course you did, although you now seem so struck with amazement. Don't you remember it?"

Baisemeaux turned pale, and then red, looked at Aramis, who looked at him, and finished by stammering out:

"Certainly—I am delighted—but upon my honor—I have not the slightest— Ah! I have such a wretched memory!"

"Well, I am wrong, I see," said D'Artagnan, as if he were offended.

"Wrong, what for?"

"Wrong to remember anything about it, it seems."

Baisemeaux hurried toward him.

"Do not stand on ceremony, my dear captain," he said, "I have the worst memory in the world. I no sooner leave off thinking of my pigeons and their pigeon-house, than I am no better than the rawest recruit."

"At all events, you remember it now!" said D'Artagnan boldly.

"Yes, yes," replied the governor hesitating; "I think I remember."

"It was when you came to the palace to see me; you told me some story or other about your accounts with Monsieur de Louviere and Monsieur de Tremblay."

"Oh, yes, perfectly."

"And about Monsieur d'Herblay's kindness toward you."

"Ah!" exclaimed Aramis, looking the unhappy governor full in the face, "and yet you just now said you had no memory, Monsieur de Baisemeaux."

Baisemeaux interrupted the musketeer in the midst of his revelations.

"Yes, yes; you're quite right. How could I have forgotten? I remember it now as well as possible; I beg you a thousand pardons. But now, once for all, my dear Monsieur d'Artagnan, be sure that at this present time, as at any other, whether invited or not, you are perfectly at home here, you and Monsieur d'Herblay, your friend," he said, turning toward Aramis; "and this gentleman, too," he added, bowing to Athos.

"Well, I thought it would be sure to turn out so," replied D'Artagnan, "and that is the reason I came. Having nothing to do this evening at the Palais Royal, I wished to judge for myself what your ordinary style of living was like; and as I was coming along, I met the Comte de la Fere."

Athos bowed.

"The comte, who had just left his majesty, handed me an order which required immediate attention. We were close by here; I wished to call in, even if it were for no

other object than that of shaking hands with you, and of presenting the comte to you, of whom you spoke so highly that evening at the palace, when——"

"Certainly, certainly—Monsieur le Comte de la Fere."

"Precisely."

"The comte is welcome, I am sure."

"And he will sup with you two, I suppose, while I, unfortunate dog that I am, must run off on a matter of duty. Oh! what happy things you are, compared to myself," he added, sighing as loud as Porthos might have done.

"And so you are going away, then?" said Aramis and Baisemeaux together, with the same expression of delighted surprise, the tone of which was immediately noticed by D'Artagnan.

"I leave you in my place," he said, "a noble and excellent guest."

And he touched Athos gently on the shoulder, who, astonished also, could not prevent exhibiting his surprise a little; a tone which was noticed by Aramis only, for M. de Baisemeaux was not quite equal to the three friends in point of intelligence.

"What, are you going to leave us?" resumed the governor.

"I shall only be about an hour, or an hour and a half. I will return in time for dessert."

"Oh, we will wait for you!" said Baisemeaux.

"No, no; that would be really disobliging me."

"You will be sure to return, though?" said Athos with an expression of doubt.

"Most certainly," he said, pressing his friend's hand confidentially; and he added, in a low voice, "Wait for me, Athos; be cheerful and lively as possible, and, above all, don't allude even to business affairs, for Heaven's sake."

And with a renewed pressure of the hand, he seemed to warn the comte of the necessity of keeping perfectly discreet and impenetrable. Baisemeaux led D'Artagnan to the gate. Aramis, with many friendly protestations of delight, sat down by Athos, determined to make him speak; but Athos possessed every virtue and quality to the very highest degree. If necessity had required it, he would have been the finest orator in the world, but on other occasions he would rather have died than have opened his lips.

Ten minutes after D'Artagnan's departure, the three gentlemen sat down to the table, which was covered with the most substantial display of gastronomic luxury. Large joints, exquisite dishes, preserves, the greatest variety of

wines, appeared successively upon the table, which was served at the king's expense, and of which expense M. Colbert would have found no difficulty in saving two thirds, without any one in the Bastile being the worse for it. Baisemeaux was the only one who eat and drank resolutely. Aramis allowed nothing to pass by him, but merely touched everything he took; Athos, after the soup and three *hors d'œuvres,* eat nothing more. The style of conversation was such as could hardly be otherwise between three men so opposite in temper and ideas. Aramis was incessantly asking himself by what extraordinary chance Athos was at Baisemeaux's when D'Artagnan was no longer there, and why D'Artagnan did not remain when Athos was there. Athos sounded all the depths of the mind of Aramis, who lived in the midst of subterfuge, evasion, and intrigue; he studied his man well and thoroughly, and felt convinced that he was engaged upon some important project. And then he, too, began to think of his own personal affair, and to lose himself in conjectures as to D'Artagnan's reason for having left the Bastile so abruptly, and for leaving behind him a prisoner so badly introduced and so badly looked after by the prison authorities. But we shall not pause to examine into the thoughts and feelings of these personages, but will leave them to themselves, surrounded by the remains of poultry, game, and fish, which Baisemeaux's generous knife and fork had so mutilated. We are going to follow D'Artagnan instead, who, getting into the carriage which had brought him, said to the coachman:

"Return to the palace, and as fast as you can possibly make the horses go."

CHAPTER LXIV.

WHAT TOOK PLACE AT THE LOUVRE DURING THE SUPPER AT THE BASTILE.

M. DE ST. AIGNAN had executed the commission with which the king had entrusted him for La Valliere, as we have already seen in one of the preceding chapters, but, whatever his eloquence might have been, he did not succeed in persuading the young girl that she had in the king a protector powerful enough for her under any combination of circumstances, and that she had no need of any one else in the world when the king was on her side. In point of

fact, at the very first word which the favorite mentioned of the discovery of the famous secret, Louise, in a passion of tears, abandoned herself in utter despair to a sorrow which would have been far from flattering for the king, if he had been a witness of it from one of the corners of the room. St. Aignan, in his character of embassador, felt greatly offended at it, as his master himself would have been, and returned to inform the king what he had seen and heard; and it is there we shall now find him in a state of great agitation, in the presence of the king, who was, if possible, in a state of greater agitation that he.

"But," said the king to the courtier, when the latter had finished his report, "what did she decide to do? Shall I, at least, see her presently before supper? Will she come to me, or shall I be obliged to go to her room?"

"I believe, sire, that if your majesty wishes to see her, you will not only have to take the first step in advance, but will have to go the whole way."

"That I do not mind. Do you think she has still a fancy for that De Bragelonne?" muttered the king, between his teeth.

"Oh, sire, that is not possible; for it is you alone, I am convinced, Mademoiselle de la Valliere loves, and that, too, with all her heart. But you know that De Bragelonne belongs to that proud race who play the part of Roman heroes."

The king smiled feebly; he knew how true the illustration was, for Athos had just left him.

"As for Mademoiselle de la Valliere," St. Aignan continued, "she was brought up under the care of the dowager madame, that is to say, in the greatest austerity and formality. This young engaged couple coldly exchanged their little vows in the presence of the moon and the stars, and now, when they find they have to break those vows asunder, it plays the very deuce with them."

St. Aignan thought he should have made the king laugh; but quite on the contrary, from a mere smile Louis passed to the greatest seriousness of manner. He already began to experience that remorse which the comte had promised D'Artagnan he would inflict upon him. He reflected that, in fact, these young persons had loved and sworn fidelity to each other; that one of the two had kept his word, and that the other was too conscientious not to feel her perjury most bitterly. And his remorse was not unaccompanied; for bitter pangs of jealousy began to beset the king's heart.

He did not say another word, and, instead of going to pay a visit to his mother, or the queen, or madame, in order to amuse himself a little, and make the ladies laugh, as he himself used to say, he threw himself into the huge arm-chair in which his august father, Louis XIII., had passed so many weary days and years in company with Baradas and Cinq-Mars. St. Aignan perceived that the king was not to be amused at that moment; he tried a last resource, and pronounced Louise's name, which made the king look up immediately.

"What does your majesty intend to do this evening? Shall Mademoiselle de la Valliere be informed of your intention to see her?"

"It seems she is already aware of that," replied the king. "No, no, St. Aignan," he continued, after a moment's pause; "we will both of us pass our time in thinking, and musing, and dreaming. When Mademoiselle de la Valliere shall have sufficiently regretted what she now regrets, she will deign, perhaps, to give us some news of herself."

"Ah! sire, is it possible you can so misunderstand her heart, which is so full of devotion?"

The king rose, flushed from vexation and annoyance; he was a prey to jealousy as well as to remorse. St. Aignan was just beginning to feel that his position was becoming awkward, when the curtain before the door was raised. The king turned hastily round; his first idea was that a letter from Louise had arrived; but, instead of a letter of love, he only saw his captain of musketeers standing upright and perfectly silent in the doorway.

"Monsieur d'Artagnan," he said. "Ah! Well, monsieur?"

D'Artagnan looked at St. Aignan; the king's eyes took the same direction as those of his captain; these looks would have been clear to any one, and for a still greater reason they were so for St. Aignan. The courtier bowed and quitted the room, leaving the king and D'Artagnan alone.

"Is it done?" inquired the king.

"Yes, sire," replied the captain of the musketeers, in a grave voice, "it is done."

The king was unable to say another word. Pride, however, obliged him not to pause at what he had done; whenever a sovereign has adopted a decisive course, even though it be unjust, he is compelled to prove to all who were witnesses of his having adopted it, and particularly to prove it

to himself, that he was quite right in so adopting it. A good means for effecting that—an almost infallible means, indeed—is to try and prove his victim to be in the wrong. Louis, brought up by Mazarin and Anne of Austria, knew better than any one else his vocation as a monarch; he, therefore, endeavored to prove it on the present occasion. After a few moments' pause, which he had employed in making silently to himself the same reflections which we have just expressed aloud, he said, in an indifferent tone:

"What did the comte say?"

"Nothing at all, sire."

"Surely he did not allow himself to be arrested without saying something?"

"He said he expected to be arrested, sire."

The king raised his head haughtily.

"I presume," he said, "that Monsieur le Comte de la Fere has not continued to play his obstinate and rebellious part?"

"In the first place, sire, what do you term rebellious?" quietly asked the musketeer. "A rebel, in the eyes of the king, is a man who not only allows himself to be shut up in the Bastile, but still more, who opposes those who do not wish to take him there."

"Who do not wish to take him there!" exclaimed the king. "What do you say, captain? Are you mad?"

"I believe not, sire."

"You speak of persons who did not wish to arrest Monsieur de la Fere. Who are those persons, may I ask?"

"I should say those whom your majesty intrusted with that duty."

"But it was you whom I intrusted with it!" exclaimed the king.

"Yes, sire; it was me."

"And yet you say that, despite my orders, you had the intention of not arresting the man who had insulted me!"

"Yes, sire; that was really my intention. I even proposed to the comte to mount a horse that I had had prepared for him at the Barriere de la Conférénce."

"And what was your object in getting this horse ready?"

"Why, sire, in order that Monsieur le Comte de la Fere might be able to reach Havre, and from that place make his escape to England."

"You betrayed me, then, monsieur?" cried the king, kindling with a wild pride.

"Exactly so."

There was nothing to say in answer to statements made in such a tone; the king was astounded at such an obstinate and open resistance on the part of D'Artagnan.

"At least, you had a reason, Monsieur d'Artagnan, for acting as you did?" said the king proudly.

"I have always a reason for everything, sire."

"Your reason cannot be your friendship for the comte, at all events—the only one that can be of any avail, the only one that could possibly excuse you—for I placed you perfectly at your ease in that respect."

"Me, sire?"

"Did I not give you the choice to arrest, or not to arrest, Monsieur le Comte de la Fere?"

"Yes, sire, but——"

"But what?" exclaimed the king impatiently.

"But you warned me, sire, that if I did not arrest him, your captain of the guards should do so."

"Was I not considerate enough toward you, from the very moment I did not compel you to obey me?"

"To me, sire, you were; but not to my friend, for my friend would be arrested all the same, whether by myself or by the captain of the guards."

"And this is your devotion, monsieur, a devotion which argues and reasons. You are no soldier, monsieur!"

"I wait for your majesty to tell me what I am."

"Well then—you are a Frondeur."

"And since there is no longer any Fronde, sire, in that case——"

"But if what you say is true——"

"What I say is always true, sire."

"What have you come to say to me, monsieur?"

"I have come to say to your majesty 'Sire Monsieur de la Fere is in the Bastile.'"

"That is not your fault, it would seem."

"That is true, sire; but, at all events, he is there; and since he is there, it is important that your majesty should know it."

"Ah! Monsieur d'Artagnan, so you set your king at defiance?"

"Sire——"

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, I warn you that you are abusing my patience."

"On the contrary, sire."

"What do you mean by 'on the contrary?'"

"I have come to get myself arrested, too."

"To get yourself arrested—you?"

"Of course. My friend will get wearied to death in the Bastile by himself, and I have come to propose to your majesty to permit me to bear him company; if your majesty will but give the word, I will arrest myself; I shall not need the captain of the guards for that, I assure you."

The king darted toward the table and seized hold of a pen to write the order for D'Artagnan's imprisonment.

"Pay attention, monsieur, that this is forever!" cried the king, in a tone of stern menace.

"I can quite believe that," returned the musketeer; "for when you have once done such an act as that, you will never be able to look me in the face again."

The king dashed down his pen violently.

"Leave the room, monsieur!" he said.

"Not so, if it please your majesty."

"How is that?"

"Sire, I came to speak gently and temperately to your majesty; your majesty got into a passion with me; that is a misfortune; but I shall not the less, on that account, say what I had to say to you."

"Your resignation, monsieur—your resignation!" cried the king.

"Sire, you know whether I care about my resignation or not, since at Blois, on the very day when you refused King Charles the million which my friend, the Comte de la Fere, gave him, I then tendered my resignation to your majesty."

"Very well, monsieur—do it at once!"

"No, sire; for there is no question of my resignation at the present moment. Your majesty took up your pen just now to send me to the Bastile—why should you change your intention?"

"D'Artagnan! Gascon that you are! who is the king, allow me to ask—you or myself?"

"You, sire, unfortunately."

"What do you mean by 'unfortunately?' "

"Yes, sire; for if it were I——"

"If it were you, you would approve of Monsieur d'Artagnan's rebellious conduct, I suppose?"

"Certainly."

"Really!" said the king, shrugging his shoulders.

"And I should tell my captain of the musketeers," continued D'Artagnan, "I should tell him, looking at him all the while with human eyes, and not with eyes like coals of fire, 'Monsieur d'Artagnan, I had forgotten that I was the

king, for I descended from my throne in order to insult a gentleman.'"

"Monsieur," said the king, "do you think you can excuse your friend by exceeding him in insolence?"

"Oh! sire, I should go much further than he did," said D'Artagnan; "and it would be your own fault. I should tell you what he, a man full of the finest sense of delicacy, did not tell you; I should say, 'Sire, you have sacrificed his son, and he defended his son—you sacrified himself; he addressed you in the name of honor, of religion, of virtue —you repulsed, drove him away, imprisoned him.' I should be harder than he was, for I should say to you, 'Sire, it is for you to choose. Do you wish to have friends or lackeys —soldiers or slaves—great men or mere puppets? Do you wish men to serve you, or to bend and crouch before you? Do you wish men to love you, or to be afraid of you? If you prefer baseness, intrigue, cowardice, say so at once, sire, and we will leave you—we who are the only individuals who are left—nay, I will say more, the only models of the valor of former times; we who have done our duty, and have exceeded, perhaps, in courage and in merit the men already great for posterity. Choose, sire! and that, too, without delay. Whatever remains to you of great nobles, guard it with a jealous eye; you will never be deficient in courtiers. Delay not—and send me to the Bastile with my friend; for, if you have not known how to listen to the Comte de la Fere, whose voice is the sweetest and noblest when honor is his theme; if you do not know how to listen to D'Artagnan, the frankest and honestest voice of sincerity, you are a bad king, and to-morrow will be a poor king. And learn from me, sire, that bad kings are hated by their people, and poor kings are driven ignominiously away.' That is what I had to say to you, sire; you are wrong to have driven me to do it."

The king threw himself back in his chair, cold as death and as livid as a corpse. Had a thunderbolt fallen at his feet he could not have been more astonished; he seemed as if his respiration had utterly ceased, and that he was at the point of death. The honest voice of sincerity, as D'Artagnan had called it, had pierced through his heart like a sword-blade.

D'Artagnan had said all he had to say. Comprehending the king's anger, he drew his sword, and approaching Louis XIV. respectfully, he placed it on the table. But the king, with a furious gesture, thrust aside the sword, which fell

on the ground and rolled to D'Artagnan's feet. Notwithstanding the perfect mastery which D'Artagnan exercised over himself, he, too, in his turn, became pale, and, trembling with indignation, said:

"A king may disgrace a soldier—he may exile him, and may even condemn him to death; but were he a hundred times a king, he has no right to insult him by casting dishonor upon his sword! Sire, a King of France has never repulsed with contempt the sword of such a man as I am! Stained with disgrace as this sword now is, it has henceforth no other sheath than either your heart or my own! I choose my own, sire; and you have to thank Heaven and my own patience that I do so!"

Then snatching up his sword he cried:

"My blood be upon your head!" and with a rapid gesture, he placed the hilt upon the floor and directed the point of the blade toward his breast.

The king, however, with a movement far more rapid than that of D'Artagnan, threw his right arm around the musketeer's neck, and with his left hand seized hold of the blade by the middle, and returned it silently to the scabbard. D'Artagnan, upright, pale, and still trembling, let the king do all to the very end. Louis, overcome, and softened by gentler feelings, returned to the table, took a pen in his hand, wrote a few lines, signed them, and then held it out to D'Artagnan.

"What is this paper, sire?" inquired the captain.

"An order for Monsieur d'Artagnan to set the Comte de la Fere at liberty immediately."

D'Artagnan seized the king's hand, and imprinted a kiss upon it; he then folded the order, placed it in his belt, and quitted the room. Neither the king nor the captain had said a syllable.

"Oh, human heart! the guide and director of kings," murmured Louis, when alone, "when shall I learn to read in your inmost recesses, as in the leaves of a book? Oh! I am not a bad king—nor am I a poor king; but I am still a child, after all."

CHAPTER LXV.

POLITICAL RIVALS.

D'Artagnan had promised M. de Baisemeaux to return in time for dessert, and he kept his word. They had just reached the finer and more delicate class of wines and liquors with which the governor's cellar had the reputation of being most admirably stocked, when the spurs of the captain resounded in the corridor, and he himself appeared at the threshold. Athos and Aramis had played a close game; neither of the two had been able to gain the slightest advantage over the other. They had supped, talked a good deal about the Bastile, of the last journey to Fontainebleau, of the intended *fête* that M. Fouquet was about to give at Vaux; they had generalized on every possible subject; and no one, excepting Baisemeaux, had in the slightest degree alluded to private matters. D'Artagnan arrived in the very midst of the conversation, still pale and much disturbed by his interview with the king. Baisemeaux hastened to give him a chair; D'Artagnan accepted a glass of wine, and set it down empty. Athos and Aramis both remarked his emotion; as for Baisemeaux, he saw nothing more than the captain of the king's musketeers, to whom he endeavored to show every possible attention. But, although Aramis had remarked his emotion, he had not been able to guess the cause of it. Athos alone believed he had detected it. For him, D'Artagnan's return, and particularly the manner in which he, usually so impassible, seemed overcome, signified, "I have just asked the king something which the king has refused me." Thoroughly convinced that his conjecture was correct, Athos smiled, rose from the table, and made a sign to D'Artagnan, as if to remind him that they had something else to do than to sup together. D'Artagnan immediately understood him, and replied by another sign. Aramis and Baisemeaux watched this silent dialogue, and looked inquiringly at each other. Athos felt that he was called upon to give an explanation of what was passing.

"The truth is, my friends," said the Comte de la Fere, with a smile, "that you, Aramis, have been supping with a state criminal, and you, Monsieur de Baisemeaux, with your prisoner."

Baisemeaux uttered an exclamation of surprise, and almost of delight; for he was exceedingly proud and vain of

his fortress; and for his own individual profit, the more prisoners he had, the happier he was; and the higher the prisoners were in rank, the prouder he felt. Aramis assumed an expression of countenance which he thought the position justified, and said:

"Well, dear Athos, forgive me; but I almost suspected what has happened. Some prank of Raoul and La Valliere, I suppose?"

"Alas!" said Baisemeaux.

"And," continued Aramis, "you, a high and powerful nobleman as you are, forgetful that courtiers now exist—you have been to the king, I suppose, and told him what you thought of his conduct?"

"Yes, you have guessed right."

"So that," said Baisemeaux, trembling at having supped so familiarly with a man who had fallen into disgrace with the king, "so that, Monsieur le Comte——"

"So that, my dear governor," said Athos, "my friend D'Artagnan will communicate to you the contents of the paper which I perceive just peeping out of his belt, and which assuredly can be nothing else than the order for my incarceration."

Baisemeaux held out his hand with his accustomed eagerness. D'Artagnan drew two papers from his belt, and presented one of them to the governor, who unfolded it, and then read, in a low tone of voice, looking at Athos over the paper as he did so, and pausing from time to time:

"'Order to detain in my château of the Bastile, Monsieur le Comte de la Fere.' Oh, monsieur! this is indeed a very melancholy honor for me."

"You will have a patient prisoner, monsieur," said Athos, in his calm, soft voice.

"A prisoner, too, who will not remain a month with you, my dear governor," said Aramis; while Baisemeaux, still holding the order in his hand, transcribed it upon the prison registry.

"Not a day, or rather, not even a night," said D'Artagnan, displaying the second order of the king, "for now, dear Monsieur de Baisemeaux, you will have the goodness to transcribe also this order for setting the comte immediately at liberty."

"Ah!" said Aramis, "it is a labor that you have deprived me of, D'Artagnan;" and he pressed the musketeer's hand in a significant manner, at the same moment as that of Athos.

"What!" said the latter, in astonishment, "the king sets me at liberty!"

"Read, my dear friend," returned D'Artagnan.

Athos took the order and read it.

"It is quite true," he said.

"Are you sorry for it?" asked D'Artagnan.

"Oh, no; on the contrary, I wish the king no harm, and the greatest evil or misfortune that any one can wish kings is that they should commit an act of injustice. But you have had a difficult and painful task, I know. Tell me, have you not, D'Artagnan?"

"I? not at all," said the musketeer, laughing; "the king does everything I wish him to do."

Aramis looked fixedly at D'Artagnan, and saw that he was not speaking the truth. But Baisemeaux had eyes for nothing but D'Artagnan, so great was his admiration for a man who seemed to make the king do all he wished.

"And does the king exile Athos?" inquired Aramis.

"No, not precisely; the king did not explain himself upon that subject," replied D'Artagnan; "but I think the comte could not well do better, unless, indeed, he wishes particularly to thank the king——"

"No, indeed," replied Athos, smiling.

"Well, then, I think," resumed D'Artagnan, "that the comte cannot do better than to retire to his own château. However, my dear Athos, you have only to speak, to tell me what you want. If any particular place of residence is more agreeable to you than another, I am influential enough, perhaps, to obtain it for you."

"No, thank you," said Athos; "nothing can be more agreeable to me, my dear friend, than to return to my solitude beneath my noble trees, on the banks of the Loire. If Heaven be the overruling physician of the evils of the mind, nature is a sovereign remedy. And so, monsieur," continued Athos, turning again toward Baisemeaux, "I am now free, I suppose?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Comte, I think so—at least, I hope so," said the governor, turning over and over the two papers in question, "unless, however, Monsieur d'Artagnan has a third order to give me."

"No, my dear Monsieur Baisemeaux, no," said the musketeer; "the second is quite enough; we can stop there."

"Ah! Monsieur le Comte," said Baisemeaux, addressing Athos, "you do not know what you are losing. I should have placed you among the thirty-franc prisoners, like the

generals—what am I saying?—I mean among the fifty-francs, like the princes, and you would have supped every evening as you have done to-night."

"Allow me, monsieur," said Athos, "to prefer my own simpler fare." And then, turning to D'Artagnan, he said, "Let us go, my dear friend. Shall I have that greatest of all pleasures for me—that of having you as my companion?"

"To the city gate only," replied D'Artagnan, "after which I will tell you what I told the king. I am on duty."

"And you, my dear Aramis," said Athos, smiling, "will you accompany me? La Fere is on the road to Vannes."

"Thank you, my dear friend," said Aramis, "but I have an appointment in Paris this evening, and I cannot leave without very serious interests suffering by my absence."

"In that case," said Athos, "I must say adieu, and take my leave of you. My dear Monsieur de Baisemeaux, I have to thank you exceedingly for your kind and friendly disposition toward me, and particularly for the specimen you have given me of the usual fare of the Bastile."

And, having embraced Aramis, and shaken hands with M. de Baisemeaux, and having received their wishes for an agreeable journey from them both, Athos set off with D'Artagnan.

While the *dénouement* of the scene of the Palais Royal was taking place at the Bastile, let us relate what was going on at the lodgings of Athos and De Bragelonne. Grimaud, as we have seen, had accompanied his master to Paris; and, as we have said, he was present when Athos went out; he had observed D'Artagnan gnaw the corners of his mustache; he had seen his master get into the carriage; he had narrowly examined both their countenances, and he had known them both for a sufficiently long period to read and understand, through the mask of their impassibility, that something serious was the matter. As soon as Athos had gone he began to reflect; he then, and then only, remembered the strange manner in which Athos had taken leave of him, the embarrassment—imperceptible for any one else but himself—of the master whose ideas were, to him, so clear and defined, and the expression of whose wishes was so precise. He knew that Athos had taken nothing with him but the clothes he had on him at the time; and yet he seemed to fancy that Athos had not left for an hour merely, or even for a day. A long absence was signified by the manner in which he pronounced the word "Adieu." All these circumstances recurred to his mind, with feelings of deep

affection for Athos, with that horror of isolation and solitude which invariably besets the minds of those who love; and all these combined rendered poor Grimaud very melancholy, and particularly very uneasy. Without being able to account to himself for what he did, since his master's departure he wandered about the room, seeking, as it were, for some traces of him, like a faithful dog, who is not exactly uneasy about his absent master, but at least is restless. Only as, in addition to the instinct of the animal, Grimaud subjoined the reasoning faculties of the man, Grimaud, therefore, felt uneasy and restless, too. Not having found any indication which could serve as a guide, and having neither seen nor discovered anything which could satisfy his doubts, Grimaud began to imagine what could possibly have happened. Besides, the imagination is the resource, or, rather, the punishment of good and affectionate hearts. In fact, never does a good heart represent its absent friend to itself as being happy or cheerful. Never does the pigeon who travels in search of adventures inspire anything but terror to the pigeon who remains at home.

Grimaud soon passed from uneasiness to terror; he carefully went over in his own mind everything that had taken place; D'Artagnan's letter to Athos, the letter which had seemed to distress Athos so much after he had read it; then Raoul's visit to Athos, which resulted in Athos desiring him (Grimaud) to get his various orders and his court dress ready to put on; then his interview with the king, at the end of which Athos had returned home unusually gloomy; then the explanation between the father and the son, at the termination of which Athos had embraced Raoul with such sadness of expression, while Raoul himself went away equally sad and melancholy; and, finally, D'Artagnan's arrival, biting, as if he were vexed, the end of his mustache, and his leaving again in the carriage, accompanied by the Comte de la Fere. All this composed a drama in five acts very clearly, particularly for so analytical an examiner as Grimaud.

The first step he took was to search in his master's coat for M. d'Artagnan's letter; he found the letter still there, which contained the following:

My Dear Friend: Raoul has been to ask me for some particulars about the conduct of Mademoiselle de la Valliere during our young friend's residence in London. I am a poor captain of musketeers, and am sickened to death every day by hearing all the scandal of the barracks and

bedside conversations. If I had told Raoul all I believe, I know the poor fellow would have died from it; but I am in the king's service, and cannot relate all I hear about the king's affairs. If your heart tells you to do it, set off at once; the matter concerns you more than myself, and almost as much as Raoul."

Grimaud tore, not a handful, but a finger and thumbful of hair out of his head; he would have done more if his head of hair had been in more flourishing circumstances.

"Yes," he said, "that is the key of the whole enigma. The young girl has been playing her pranks; what people say about her and the king is true, then; our young master has been deceived; he ought to know it. Monsieur le Comte has been to see the king, and has told him a piece of his mind; and then the king sent Monsieur d'Artagnan to arrange the affair. Ah! gracious goodness!" continued Grimaud, "Monsieur le Comte, I now remember, returned without his sword."

This discovery made the perspiration break out all over poor Grimaud's face. He did not waste any more time in useless conjecture, but clapped his hat on his head, and ran to Raoul's lodgings.

Raoul, after Louise had left him, had mastered his grief, if not his affection; and, compelled to look forward on that perilous road on which madness and rebellion were hurrying him, he had seen, from the very first glance, his father exposed to the royal obstinacy; since Athos had himself been the first to oppose any resistance to the royal will. At this moment, from a very natural sympathy of feeling, the unhappy young man remembered the mysterious signs which Athos had made, and the unexpected visit of D'Artagnan; the result of the conflict between a sovereign and a subject revealed itself to his terrified vision. As D'Artagnan was on duty, that is, fixed to his post without possibility of leaving it, it was certainly not likely that he had come to pay Athos a visit merely for the pleasure of seeing him. He must have come to say something to him. This something, in such painful conjectures, was either a misfortune or a danger. Raoul trembled at having been so selfish as to have forgotten his father for his affection; at having, in a word, passed his time in idle dreams, or in an indulgence of despair, at a time when a necessity existed for repelling the imminent attack directed against Athos. The very idea nearly drove him wild; he buckled on his sword and ran

toward his father's lodgings. On his way there he encountered Grimaud, who, having set off from the opposite pole, was running with equal eagerness in search of the truth. The two men embraced each other most warmly.

"Grimaud," exclaimed Raoul, "is the comte well?"

"Have you seen him?"

"No, where is he?"

"I am trying to find out."

"And Monsieur d'Artagnan?"

"Went out with him."

"When?"

"Ten minutes after you had left."

"In what way did they go out?"

"In a carriage."

"Where did they go to?"

"I have no idea at all."

"Did my father take any money with him?"

"No."

"Or his sword?"

"No."

"I have an idea, Grimaud, that Monsieur d'Artagnan came in order to——"

"Arrest Monsieur le Comte, do you not think, monsieur?"

"Yes, Grimaud."

"I could have sworn it."

"What road did they take?"

"The way leading toward the quay."

"To the Bastile, then?"

"Yes, yes."

"Quick, quick; let us run."

"Yes; let us not lose a moment."

"But where are we to go to?" said Raoul, overwhelmed.

"We will go to Monsieur d'Artagnan first; we may perhaps learn something there."

"No; if they keep me in ignorance at my father's, they will do the same everywhere. Let us go to— Oh, good heavens! why, I must be mad to-day, Grimaud; I have forgotten Monsieur du Vallon, who is waiting for and expecting me still."

"Where is he, then?"

"At the Minimes of Vincennes."

"Thank goodness, that is on the same side as the Bastile. I will run and saddle the horses, and we will go at once," said Grimaud.

"Do, my friend, do."

CHAPTER LXVI.

IN WHICH PORTHOS IS CONVINCED, WITHOUT HAVING UNDERSTOOD ANYTHING.

THE good and worthy Porthos, faithful to all the laws of ancient chivalry, had determined to wait for M. de St. Aignan until sunset; and, as St. Aignan did not come, as Raoul had forgotten to communicate with his second, and as he found that waiting so long was very wearisome, Porthos had desired one of the gatekeepers to fetch him a few bottles of good wine and a good joint of meat—so that he, at least, might pass away the time with a glass of wine and a mouthful of something to eat. He had just finished when Raoul arrived, escorted by Grimaud, both of them riding at full speed. As soon as Porthos saw the two cavaliers riding at such a pace along the road, he did not for a moment doubt but that they were the men he was expecting, and he rose from the grass upon which he had been indolently reclining and began to stretch his legs and arms, saying, "See what it is to have good habits. The fellow has finished by coming, after all. If I had gone away, he would have found no one here, and would have taken an advantage from that." He then threw himself into a martial attitude, and drew himself up to the full height of his gigantic stature. But, instead of St. Aignan, he only saw Raoul, who, with the most despairing gestures, accosted him by crying out;

"Pray forgive me, my dear friend, I am most wretched."

"Raoul!" cried Porthos, surprised.

"You have been angry with me?" said Raoul, embracing Porthos.

"I? What for?"

"For having forgotten you. But I assure you my head seems utterly lost. If you only knew!"

"You have killed him?"

"Who?"

"St. Aignan; or, if that is not the case, what is the matter?"

"The matter is that Monsieur le Comte de la Fere has by this time been arrested."

Porthos gave a start that would have thrown down a wall.

"Arrested!" he cried out; "by whom?"

"By D'Artagnan."

"It is impossible!" said Porthos.

"My dear friend, it is perfectly true."

Porthos turned toward Grimaud, as if he needed a second confirmation of the intelligence. Grimaud nodded his head.

"And where have they taken him to?"

"Probably to the Bastile."

"What makes you think that?"

"As we came along we questioned some persons, who saw the carriage pass; and others who saw it enter the Bastile."

"Oh, oh!" muttered Porthos.

"What do you intend to do?" inquired Raoul.

"I? Nothing; only I will not have Athos remain at the Bastile."

"Do you know," said Raoul, advancing nearer to Porthos, "that the arrest was made by order of the king?"

Porthos looked at the young man, as if to say, "What does that matter to me?" This dumb language seemed so eloquent of meaning to Raoul that he did not ask another question. He mounted his horse again, and Porthos, assisted by Grimaud, had already done the same.

"Let us arrange our plan of action," said Raoul.

"Yes," returned Porthos; "that is the best thing we can do."

Raoul sighed deeply, and then paused suddenly.

"What is the matter?" asked Porthos. "Are you faint?"

"No; only I feel how utterly helpless our position is. Can we three pretend to go and take the Bastile?"

"Well, if D'Artagnan were only here," replied Porthos, "I don't know about that."

Raoul could not resist a feeling of admiration at the sight of such a perfect confidence, heroic in its simplicity. These were truly the celebrated men who, by three or four, attacked armies and assaulted castles. Those men who had terrified death itself, and who survived the wrecks of an age, and were still stronger than the most robust of the young.

"Monsieur," said he to Porthos, "you have just given me an idea; we absolutely must see Monsieur d'Artagnan."

"Undoubtedly."

"He ought by this time to have returned home, after having taken my father to the Bastile. Let us go to his house."

"First inquire at the Bastile," said Grimaud, who was in the habit of speaking little, but that to the purpose.

Accordingly, they hastened toward the fortress, when one of these chances which Heaven bestows on men of strong will caused Grimaud suddenly to perceive the carriage, which was entering by the great gate of the drawbridge. This was the moment that D'Artagnan was, as we have seen, returning from his visit to the king. In vain was it that Raoul urged on his horse in order to join the carriage, and to see whom it contained. The horses had already gained the other side of the great gate, which again closed, while one of the sentries struck the nose of Raoul's horse with his musket. Raoul turned about, only too happy to find he had ascertained something respecting the carriage which had contained his father.

"We have him," said Grimaud.

"If we wait a little, it is certain he will leave. Don't you think so, my friend?"

"Unless, indeed, D'Artagnan also be a prisoner," replied Porthos; "in which case everything is lost."

Raoul returned no answer, for any hypothesis was admissible. He instructed Grimaud to lead the horses to the little Street Jean Beausire, so as to give rise to less suspicion, and himself, with his piercing gaze, watched for the exit either of D'Artagnan or the carriage. Nor had he decided wrongly; for twenty minutes had not elapsed before the gate reopened and the carriage reappeared. A dazzling of the eyes prevented Raoul from distinguishing what figures occupied the interior. Grimaud averred that he had seen two persons, and that one of them was his master. Porthos kept looking at Raoul and Grimaud by turns, in the hope of understanding their idea.

"It is clear," said Grimaud, "that if the comte is in the carriage, either he is set at liberty or they are taking him to another prison."

"We shall soon see that by the road he takes," answered Porthos.

"If he is set at liberty," said Grimaud, "they will conduct him home."

"True," rejoined Porthos.

"The carriage does not take that way," cried Raoul; and indeed the horses were just disappearing down the Faubourg St. Antoine.

"Let us hasten," said Porthos; "we will attack the carriage on the road and tell Athos to flee."

"Rebellion!" murmured Raoul.

Porthos darted a second glance at Raoul, quite worthy

of the first. Raoul replied only by spurring the flanks of his steed. In a few moments the three cavaliers had overtaken the carriage, and followed it so closely that their horses' breath moistened the back of it. D'Artagnan, whose senses were ever on the alert, heard the trot of the horses at the moment when Raoul was telling Porthos to pass the chariot, so as to see who was the person accompanying Athos. Porthos complied, but could not see anything, for the blinds were lowered. Rage and impatience were gaining mastery over Raoul. He had just noticed the mystery preserved by Athos' companion, and determined on proceeding to extremities. On his part, D'Artagnan had perfectly recognized Porthos, and Raoul also, from under the blinds, and had communicated to the comte the result of his observation. They were desirous only of seeing whether Raoul and Porthos would push the affair to the uttermost. And this they speedily did, for Raoul, presenting his pistol, threw himself on the leader, commanding the coachman to stop. Porthos seized the coachman and dragged him from his seat. Grimaud already had hold of the carriage door. Raoul threw open his arms, exclaiming:

"Monsieur le Comte! Monsieur le Comte!"

"Ah! is it you, Raoul?" said Athos, intoxicated with joy.

"Not bad, indeed!" added D'Artagnan, with a burst of laughter; and they both embraced the young man and Porthos, who had taken possession of them.

"My brave Porthos! best of friends," cried Athos, "it is still the same with you."

"He is still only twenty," said D'Artagnan, "brave Porthos!"

"Confound it!" answered Porthos, slightly confused, "we thought that you were being arrested."

"Whil ," rejoined Athos, "the matter in question was nothing but my taking a drive in Monsieur d'Artagnan's carriage."

"But we followed you from the Bastile," returned Raoul, with a tone of suspicion and reproach.

"Where we had been to take supper with our friend Monsieur Baisemeaux. Do you recollect Baisemeaux, Porthos?"

"Very well, indeed."

"And there we saw Aramis."

"In the Bastile?"

"At supper."

"Ah!" said Porthos, again breathing freely.

"He gave us a thousand messages to you."

"And where is Monsieur le Comte going?" asked Grimaud, already recompensed by a smile from his master.

"We are going home to Blois."

"How can that be?"

"At once?" said Raoul.

"Yes; right forward."

"Without any luggage?"

"Oh! Raoul would have been instructed to forward me mine, or to bring it with him on his return, if he returns."

"If nothing detains him longer in Paris," said D'Artagnan, with a glance firm and cutting as steel, and as painful (for it reopened the poor fellow's wounds), "he will do well to follow you, Athos."

"There is nothing to keep me any longer in Paris," said Raoul.

"Then we will go immediately," replied Athos.

"And Monsieur d'Artagnan?"

"Oh! as for me, I was only accompanying Athos as far as the barrier, and I return with Porthos."

"Very good!" said the latter.

"Come, my son," added the comte, gently passing his arm round Raoul's neck to draw him into the carriage, and again embracing him. "Grimaud," continued the comte, "you will return quietly to Paris with your horse and Monsieur du Vallon's, for Raoul and I will mount here and give up the carriage to these two gentlemen to return to Paris in; and then, as soon as you arrive, you will take my clothes and letters and forward the whole to me at home."

"But," observed Raoul, who was anxious to make the comte converse, "when you return to Paris there will not be a single thing there for you—which will be very inconvenient."

"I think it will be a very long time, Raoul, ere I return to Paris. The last sojourn we have made there has not been of a nature to encourage me to repeat it."

Raoul hung his head, and said not a word more. Athos descended from the carriage and mounted the horse which had brought Porthos, and which seemed no little pleased at the exchange. Then they embraced, clasped each other's hands, interchanged a thousand pledges of eternal friendship. Porthos promised to spend a month with Athos at the first opportunity. D'Artagnan engaged to take advantage of his first leave of absence; and then, having embraced Raoul for the last time:

"To you, my boy," said he, "I will write."

Coming from D'Artagnan, who he knew wrote very seldom, these words expressed everything. Raoul was moved even to tears. He tore himself away from the musketeer, and departed.

D'Artagnan rejoined Porthos in the carriage.

"Well," said he, "my dear friend, what a day we have had!"

"Indeed we have," answered Porthos.

"You must be quite worn out?"

"Not quite; however, I shall retire early to rest, so as to be ready to-morrow."

"And wherefore?"

"Why, to complete what I have begun."

"You make me shudder, my friend; you seem to me quite angry. What the devil have you begun which is not finished?"

"Listen; Raoul has not fought, but I must fight."

"With whom? with the king?"

"How!" exclaimed Porthos, astounded, "with the king?"

"Yes, I say, you great baby, with the king."

"I assure you it is with Monsieur de St. Aignan."

"Look now, this is what I mean: you draw your sword against the king in fighting with this gentleman."

"Ah!" said Porthos, staring, "are you sure of it?"

"Indeed I am."

"What in the world are we to do, then?"

"We must try and make a good supper, Porthos. The captain of the musketeers keeps a tolerable table. There you will see the handsome St. Aignan, and will drink his health."

"I!" cried Porthos, horrified.

"What!" said D'Artagnan, "you refuse to drink the king's health?"

"But, body alive! I am not talking to you about the king at all; I am speaking of Monsieur de St. Aignan."

"But since I repeat that it is the same thing?"

"Ah, well, well!" said Porthos, overcome.

"You understand, don't you?"

"No," answered Porthos; "but 'tis all the same."

CHAPTER LXVII.

M. DE BAISEMEAUX'S "SOCIETY."

THE reader has not forgotten that, on quitting the Bastile, D'Artagnan and the Comte de la Fere had left Aramis in close confabulation with Baisemeaux. When once these two guests had departed, Baisemeaux did not in the least perceive that the conversation suffered by their absence. He used to think that wine after supper, and that of the Bastile in particular, was excellent, and that it was a stimulant quite sufficient to make an honest man talk. But he little knew his greatness, who was never more impenetrable than at dessert. His greatness, however, perfectly understood M. de Baisemeaux when he reckoned on making the governor discourse on the means which the latter regarded as efficacious. The conversation, therefore, without flagging in appearance, flagged in reality; for Baisemeaux not only had it nearly all to himself, but further, kept speaking only of that singular event—the incarceration of Athos—followed by so prompt an order to set him again at liberty. Nor, moreover, had Baisemeaux failed to observe that the two orders, of arrest and of liberation, were both in the king's hand. But then the king would not take the trouble to write similar orders, except under pressing circumstances. All this was very interesting, and, above all, very puzzling to Baisemeaux; but as, on the other hand, all this was very clear to Aramis, the latter did not attach to the occurrence the same importance as did the worthy governor. Besides, Aramis rarely put himself out of the way for anything, and he had not yet told M. de Baisemeaux for what reason he had now done so. And so at the very climax of Baisemeaux's dissertation, Aramis suddenly interrupted him.

"Tell me, my dear Monsieur Baisemeaux," said he, "have you never any other diversions at the Bastile than those at which I assisted during the two or three visits I have had the honor to pay you?"

This address was so unexpected that the governor, like a vane which suddenly receives an impulsion opposed to that of the wind, was quite dumfounded at it.

"Diversions," said he, "but I take them continually, monseigneur."

"Oh, to be sure! And these diversions?"

"Are of every kind."

"Visits, no doubt?"

"No, not visits. Visits are not frequent at the Bastile."

"What, are visits rare, then?"

"Very much so."

"Even on the part of your society?"

"What do you term by my society—the prisoners?"

"Oh, no! your prisoners, indeed! I know well it is you who visit them, and not they you. By your society I mean, my dear Monsieur Baisemeaux, the society of which you are a member."

Baisemeaux looked fixedly at Aramis, and then, as if the idea which had flashed across his mind were impossible:

"Oh," he said, "I have very little society at present. If I must own it to you, dear Monsieur d'Herblay, the fact is, to stay at the Bastile appears, for the most part, distressing and distasteful to persons of the gay world. As for the ladies, it is never without a dread, which costs me infinite trouble to allay, that they succeed in reaching my quarters. And, indeed, how should they avoid trembling a little, poor things, when they see those gloomy dungeons, and reflect that they are inhabited by prisoners who——"

And in proportion as the eyes of Baisemeaux concentrated their gaze on the face of Aramis, the worthy governor's tongue faltered more and more, until it ended by stopping altogether.

"No, you don't understand me, my dear Monsieur Baisemeaux; you don't understand me. I do not at all mean to speak of society in general, but of a particular society—of *the* society, in a word—to which you are affiliated."

Baisemeaux nearly dropped the glass of muscat which he was in the act of raising to his lips.

"Affiliated!" cried he, "affiliated!"

"Yes, affiliated, undoubtedly," repeated Aramis, with the greatest self-possession. "Are you not a member of a secret society, my dear Monsieur Baisemeaux?"

"Secret?"

"Secret or mysterious."

"Oh, Monsieur d'Herblay!"

"Consider now; don't deny it."

"But believe me."

"I believe what I know."

"I swear to you."

"Listen to me, my dear Monsieur Baisemeaux; I say yes, you say no; one of us two necessarily says what is true, and the other, it inevitably follows, what is false."

"Well, and then?"

"Well, we shall come to an understanding presently."

"Let us see," said Baisemeaux; "let us see."

"Now drink your glass of muscat, dear Monsieur de Baisemeaux," said Aramis. "What the devil! you look quite scared."

"No, no; not the least in the world—no."

"Drink, then."

Baisemeaux drank, but he swallowed the wrong way.

"Well," resumed Aramis, "if I say you are not a member of a secret or mysterious society, which you like to call it, the epithet is of no consequence; if I say you are not a member of a society similar to that I wish to designate, well, then, you will not understand a word of what I am going to say. That is all."

"Oh! be sure beforehand that I shall not understand anything."

"Well, well!"

"Try now; let us see."

"That is what I am going to do."

"If, on the contrary, you are one of the members of this society, you will immediately answer me—yes or no."

"Begin your questions," continued Baisemeaux, trembling.

"You will agree, dear Monsieur de Baisemeaux," continued Aramis, with the same impassibility, "that it is evident a man cannot be a member of a society, it is evident that he cannot enjoy the advantages it offers to the affiliated, without being himself bound to certain little services."

"In short," stammered Baisemeaux, "that would be intelligible, if——"

"Well," resumed Aramis, "there is in the society of which I speak, and of which, as it seems, you are not a member."

"Allow me," said Baisemeaux. "I should not like to say absolutely."

"There is an engagement entered into by all the governors and captains of the fortresses affiliated to the order."

Baisemeaux grew pale.

"Now, the engagement," continued Aramis firmly, "is of this nature."

Baisemeaux rose, manifesting unspeakable emotion.

"Go on, dear Monsieur d'Herblay; go on," said he.

Aramis then spoke, or rather, recited the following paragraph, in the same tone as if he had been reading it from a book:

"The aforesaid captain or governor of a fortress shall allow to enter, when need shall arise, and on demand of the prisoner, a confessor affiliated to the order."

He stopped. Baisemeaux was quite distressing to look at, being so wretchedly pale and trembling.

"Is not that the text of the agreement?" quietly asked Aramis.

"Monseigneur!" began Baisemeaux.

"Ah! well, you begin to understand, I think."

"Monseigneur," cried Baisemeaux, "do not trifle so with my unhappy mind! I find myself nothing in your hands, if you have the malignant desire to draw from me the little secrets of my administration."

"Oh! by no means; pray undeceive yourself, dear Monsieur Baisemeaux; it is not the little secrets of your administration, but those of your conscience that I aim at."

"Well, then, my conscience be it, dear Monsieur d'Herblay. But have some consideration for the situation I am in, which is no ordinary one."

"It is no ordinary one, my dear monsieur," continued the inflexible Aramis, "if you are a member of this society; but it is quite a natural one if free from all engagement. You are answerable only to the king."

"Well, monsieur, well! I obey only the king, and whom else would you have a French nobleman obey?"

Aramis did not yield an inch; but with that silvery voice of his continued:

"It is very pleasant," said he, "for a French nobleman, for a prelate of France, to hear a man of your mark express himself so loyally, dear De Baisemeaux, and, having heard you, to believe no more than you do."

"Have you doubted, monsieur?"

"I? oh, no!"

"And so you doubt no longer?"

"I have no longer any doubt that such a man as you, monsieur," said Aramis gravely, "does not faithfully serve the masters whom he voluntarily chose for himself."

"Masters!" cried Baisemeaux.

"Yes, masters, I said."

"Monsieur d'Herblay, you are still jesting, are you not?"

"Oh, yes! I understand that it is a more difficult position to have several masters than one; but the embarrassment is owing to you, my dear Baisemeaux, and I am not the cause of it."

"Certainly not," returned the unfortunate governor,

more embarrassed than ever; "but what are you doing? You are leaving the table?"

"Assuredly."

"Are you going?"

"Yes, I am going."

"But you are behaving very strangely toward me, monseigneur."

"I am behaving strangely—how do you make that out?"

"Have you sworn, then, to put me to the torture?"

"No; I should be sorry to do so."

"Remain, then."

"I cannot."

"And why?"

"Because I have no longer anything to do here; and, indeed, I have duties to fulfill elsewhere."

"Duties, so late as this?"

"Yes; understand me now, my dear De Baisemeaux; they told me at the place whence I came, 'The aforesaid governor or captain will allow to enter, as need shall arise, on the prisoner's demand, a confessor affiliated with the order.' I came; you do not know what I mean, and so I shall return to tell them that they are mistaken, and that they must send me elsewhere."

"What! you are—" cried Baisemeaux, looking at Aramis almost in terror.

"The confessor affiliated to the order," said Aramis, without changing his voice.

But, gentle as the words were, they had the same effect on the unhappy governor as a clap of thunder. Baisemeaux became livid, and it seemed to him as if Aramis' beaming eyes were two forks of flame, piercing to the very bottom of his soul.

"The confessor!" murmured he; "you, monseigneur, the confessor of the order?"

"Yes, I; but we have nothing to unravel together, seeing that you are not one of the affiliated."

"Monseigneur!"

"And I understand, that, not being so, you refuse to comply with its command."

"Monseigneur, I beseech you, condescend to hear me."

"And wherefore?"

"Monseigneur, I do not say that I have nothing to do with the society."

"Ah, ah!"

"I say not that I refuse to obey."

"Nevertheless, Monsieur de Baisemeaux, what has passed wears very much the air of resistance."

"Oh, no, monseigneur, no; I only wished to be certain."

"To be certain of what?" said Aramis, in a tone of supreme contempt.

"Of nothing at all, monseigneur."

Baisemeaux lowered his voice, and bending before the prelate, said:

"I am at all times and in all places at the disposal of my masters, but——"

"Very good. I like you better thus, monsieur," said Aramis, as he resumed his seat, and put out his glass to Baisemeaux, whose hand trembled so that he could not fill it. "You were saying 'but'—" continued Aramis.

"But," replied the unhappy man, "having no notice, I was far from expecting."

"Does not the Gospel say, 'Watch, for the moment is known only of God?' Do not the rules of the order say, 'Watch, for that which I will, you ought always to will also? And in what pretext is it that you did not expect the confessor, Monsieur de Baisemeaux?"

"Because, monseigneur, there is at present in the Bastile no prisoner ill."

Aramis shrugged his shoulders.

"What do you know about that?" said he.

"But, nevertheless, it appears to me——"

"Monsieur de Baisemeaux," said Aramis, turning round in his chair, "here is your servant, who wishes to speak with you;" and at this moment De Baisemeaux's servant appeared at the threshold of the door.

"What is it?" asked Baisemeaux sharply.

"Monsieur," said the man, "they are bringing you the doctor's return."

Aramis looked at De Baisemeaux with a calm and confident eye.

"Well," said he, "let the messenger enter."

The messenger entered, saluted, and handed in the report. Baisemeaux ran his eye over it, and raising his head said, in surprise.

"No. 12 is ill."

"How was it, then," said Aramis carelessly, "that you told me everybody was well in your hotel, Monsieur de Baisemeaux?"

And he emptied his glass without removing his eyes from Baisemeaux.

The governor then made a sign to the messenger, and when he had quitted the room said, still trembling:

"I think that there is in the article, 'on the prisoner's demand.'"

"Yes, it is so," answered Aramis. "But see what it is they want with you now."

At that moment a sergeant put his head in at the door.

"What do you want now?" cried Baisemeaux. "Can you not leave me in peace for ten minutes?"

"Monsieur," said the sergeant, "the sick man, No. 12, has commissioned the turnkey to request you to send him a confessor."

Baisemeaux very nearly sunk on the floor; but Aramis disdained to reassure him, just as he had disdained to terrify him.

"What must I answer?" inquired Baisemeaux.

"Just what you please," replied Aramis, compressing his lips; "that is your business. I am not the governor of the Bastile."

"Tell the prisoner," cried Baisemeaux quickly, "tell the prisoner that his request is granted."

The sergeant left the room.

"Oh! monseigneur, monseigneur," murmured Baisemeaux, "how could I have suspected—how could I have foreseen this!"

"Who requested you to suspect, and who besought you to foresee?" contemptuously answered Aramis. "The order suspects; the order knows; the order foresees—is not that enough?"

"What do you command?" added Baisemeaux.

"I?—nothing at all. I am nothing but a poor priest, a simple confessor. Have I your orders to go and see the sufferer?"

"Oh, monseigneur, I do not order; I pray you to go."

"'Tis well; then conduct me to him."

THE END.